

Pressezentrum

Sperrfrist: 27. Mai 2017 11.00 Uhr
Projekt: Hauptvorträge
Veranstaltung: **ecclesia semper reformanda**
Brauchen wir andere Kirchen?
Zeit, Ort: Sa. 11.00 – 13.00, Halle 20, Messe Berlin, Charlottenburg (594 | E1)
Referent/in: **Nadia Bolz-Weber, Pastorin, House for All Sinners and Saints, Denver/USA**

"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance"

This is the first line of Martin Luther's 95 Thesis which he nailed to the door of a church 500 years ago.

My congregation, House for all sinners and saint has a logo which looks like a piece of parchment with a nail at the top. When our congregation was a couple years old we had shirts made that had the parchment and nail logo on the front and on the back it said "Radical Protestants; nailing shit to the church door since 1517.

I am entirely unqualified to speak about reformation history, or the political import of the reformation, or interpreting theological documents from the 16th century. Many qualified people will be giving talks and publishing books about these important issues this year. But not me.

So, on this 500 year anniversary of the Reformation, as we wax on about history and academic theology I realized the thing I find the most useful for us as the church today in 2017 is this simple fact:

that Martin Luther's work as a theologian was not primarily academic or political it was first and foremost pastoral.

When he penned his complaints about the selling of indulgences he did so as a result of seeing what weighed down the people in his care.

So perhaps we do not need to become more deeply political or academic in order to reform the church once again. Perhaps we need to repent and become more deeply pastoral. we need only look in our own hearts and lives and in the hearts and lives of the people in front of us to understand why the issue of repentance and forgiveness of sins was at the theological center of Luther's work and why it should still be at the center of ours.

I preached a sermon last year about repentance and how trapped we get in our own thinking. After all, repentance - metanoia - means to snap out of it, to change direction, to think new thoughts... to me, that sounds amazing – the opportunity to think new thoughts. Because I honestly feel like I am a prisoner of about half a dozen neural grooves that just funnel the same exact thoughts through my brain over and over year after year. And it's like I'm in bondage to this.

What if repentance offers freedom from this - freedom from the bondage of thinking the same thoughts over and over? Like the kingdom of Heaven offers us brain spackle to fill those deeply worn neural groves. I'd sign up for that. Because I find my mind exhausting. Like, sometimes I think I suffer from a disease called "first thought wrong"

Anyhow, in this sermon I invited people to write the following on a post-its and stick them to the wall: what thought do you have the most often about yourself, to yourself. Take a moment and think about that for yourself. What do you say to yourself about yourself most frequently.

Because the things written on those post-its broke me.

Most common thought people had about themselves? "I am a failure" or "I am not enough". I'll ever be a good enough mom. Never be a good enough student. Never be a good enough spouse. And in 2nd place was a tie between the thought "I will never be loved". And "I am fat and worthless". Third place was some version of "What I have done is unforgiveable" These are the kind of burdens people in our communities are bringing with them into church. Let me gently ask this question: Are our churches places where they can speak honestly about these things? Are our churches places where the truth of this is addressed? What do people who are tortured by their failures and feelings of worthlessness hear in the sermons of our churches– interesting information about life in

the 1st century? Some sermon illustration off the internet? Suggestions for self-improvement? Maybe some power of positive thinking Deepok Choprah nonsense?

What I have seen in myself and in my parish is that, like in Luther's day, people are still in bondage to sin and still need a freedom only repentance and forgiveness of sins affords us by the Gospel.

Just parenthetically I want to say that as a catharsis we took all of those post-its and burned them outside the church after worship. We gathered around a small fire of our darkest thoughts and as we watched the flames, one of my more delightful parishioners said "dang. We really should have brought marshmallows"

That is what freedom looks like. Shamelessly roasting marshmallows over a fire of our darkest thoughts and sins.

In a Q and A last year someone asked me what my opinion was of what Jesus would think of the church if he came back today (assuming I'd say he'd ask what was up with vestments and organ music) but instead I said I he'd wonder why his church doesn't talk about forgiveness of sins nearly as much as he did.

I know it's a little awkward to talk about sin. And yes, forgiveness of sins is about us confessing and being absolved of our moral transgressions. I would never want to undersell that. In fact we have a rite in the Lutheran church for private confession and absolution and my parishioners avail themselves of this with some regularity. As a pastor, it's one of the great honors in life to take someone's confession but honestly it's so much more boring than you might think. I'm usually like "nothing personal but I'm like super unimpressed with your sin".

But I suggest that forgiveness of sins – the thing Jesus talked about like, all the time, is not only something we need to live in freedom, but it is also central to our relationship with God.

Because Sin – the ways in which we are turned in on ourselves and the damage and behavior that results in this – well, sin is a force in the world that robs us of the abundant life God wants for us. Sin keeps us in shame and it keeps us from the freedom that is ours in Christ.

But if sin is a force then so is grace. Grace – that thing we talk about so much but trust in so little - grace is the force that frees us.

So in order for us to preach why the good news is good we cannot be afraid to also talk about why the bad news is bad. This might feel counter-intuitive but we cannot afford to have shame about sin. Remorse, yes. But shame? No. Because shame keeps us from just saying the truth about our need for God.

Yet it can be so hard to tell the truth about ourselves. Maybe because we don't think we should have the jagged edges to begin with. As though being humans in need of a God is a failing when in fact it is not. I think shame does this to us. Makes us hide who we are. But the truth is the truth whether we hide it or not.

And one message of the Gospel that people need to hear is that the Christian faith allows for imperfection, it allows for sins that are in need of forgiveness, it allows for God to be God and for us to be they who are in need of God. Even though that's seldom how it's sold to us. I was raised in a church believing that to have a right relationship to God is to undertake the project of our own sanctification so perfectly...to make ourselves so super-duper good that we never need to bug him for help. When in fact to be in right relationship to God is simply knowing how in need of God's grace we are. To be in right relationship with God is to live a life of repentance – where we are unashamed to speak the truth of being those on whom God's grace finds a place to do it's thing. As Martin Luther says, For from the error of not understanding what sin is, there arises another error, that people cannot understand what grace is.

This is a radical idea in our culture and in our churches. That we need something besides ourselves.

Because if you look for it you'll see how messages of self-improvement – financial, spiritual, physical – are everywhere in our culture. It is our modern selling of indulgences.

But as someone who stumbles through faith and life in general and who has never managed to feel "spiritual" for any extended period of time – which is not just a joke...I literally put up a tweet a few weeks ago that admitted that I get what can only be described as road rage when I'm stuck behind someone walking slowly in a prayer labyrinth. That's how hopeless I am. Well, as a person like that I guess I only really feel connected to other people who are also like that. And while I might feel inspired by someone who is good, I only feel less alone when someone admits their failures with me, the things they struggle with, the parts that are more jagged than smooth ... in other words, when I know what thoughts they say most often to themselves about themselves.

Yet in so much of religion and spirituality – be it Evangelical purity culture or New Age Yoga culture, so much of what is offered is a way to sand down the edges of ourselves – Like it's all a program for making ourselves into something less janky and more pure, as if with enough yoga or Bible study, or prayer labyrinths or organic foods, or buying indulgences we can spiritually improve ourselves into purity of heart and mind. So much spirituality

and self-improvement is nothing less than an attempt to hide our need of God, to smooth out our rough edges – and yet it just so happens that the jagged edges of our humanity are what actually connect us to God and to one another. Those wounds and failures and misconceptions and mistakes create enough texture on us that God and our fellow humans have something to grab onto.

And yet so many of us remain tormented by the distance between our ideal self and our actual self. I know I am.

It's as though there is this other version of Nadia in my head, one that has had all her defects of character removed. She's tidy and organized and selfless and can lift heavier weight than I can. She never gets angry in traffic and needs fewer hours of sleep and she can recite whole poems. She's basically nothing like me and for some reason I think that with enough "spiritual practices" I can be more her and less me.

It's this burden we can carry: of always knowing the difference between our ideal self and our actual self. The difference between our ideal income and our actual income, between our ideal weight and our actual weight, between our ideal hobbies and our actual hobbies, between our ideal relationships and our actual relationships ...

It's like an emotional and spiritual Pinterest board always mocking us.

And we come by this little pathology honestly. Our culture colludes in this fantasy of self-improvement.

And yet, it never works. Not really

And the tyranny of that space between our ideal self and our actual self is what we Lutherans call The Law. Feeling convicted by the law looks like every feminist who in secret hates her body and every televangelist who's really addicted to porn and every social worker who doesn't actually look into the eyes of the homeless man they pass every day on the corner. They all know what the Law can do to us. They all know how cruel the distance between our ideal self and our actual self can feel... And that feeling of not ever really hitting the mark, whatever mark that is, is the feeling of the Law convicting you.

Martin Luther knew what it felt like for the Law to convict him, accuse him, leave him with nowhere to rest. And what really sparked the Protestant Reformation is the fact that while feeling this way, Luther read Paul: *since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift. We are saved by grace through faith and not through works of the Law.*

And Luther believed it to be true and because he believed that God's grace is a gift he no longer accepted what the church had for so long taught: that we are really saved by fulfilling all the "shoulds" and in so doing, bridging for ourselves the gap between our ideal self and our actual self.

By the way, you can tell the Law because it is almost always an if-then proposition – *If* you follow all the rules in the Bible God *then* will love you and you will be happy. *If* you lose 20 pounds *then* you will be worthy to be loved. *If* you never have a racist or sexist or homophobic thought *then* you will be worthy of calling other people out on *their* racism and sexism and homophobia. The Law is always conditional and it is never anything anyone can do perfectly.

The Law can never save us because under the Law there are only 2 options: pride and despair. When fulfilling the "shoulds" is the only thing that determines our worthiness we are either prideful about our ability to follow the rules compared to others or we despair at our inability to perfectly do anything. Either way, it's still bondage.

And that's why the Gospel is different. The Gospel is not an if-then proposition. It's more Wizard of Oz than that. The Gospel is a because because because because proposition. *Because* God is our creator and *because* we rebel against the idea of being created beings and insist on trying to be God for ourselves and *because* God will not play by our rules and *because* in the fullness of time when God had had quite enough of all of that God became human in Jesus Christ to show us who God really is and *because* when God came to God's own, we received him not, and *because* God would not be deterred God went so far as to hang from the cross we built and did not even lift a finger to condemn but said *forgive them they know not what they are doing* and *because* Jesus Christ defeated even death and the grave and rose on the 3rd day and *because* we all sin and fall short and are forever turned in on ourselves and forget that we belong to God and that none of our successes guarantee this and none of our failures exclude this and *because* God loves God's creation and God refuses for our sin and brokenness to be the last word and *because* God came to save and not to judge then **therefore** ... **therefore** we are saved by grace as a gift and not by the works of the Law and this truth will set you free like no self-help plan or healthy living or social justice work "shoulds" can ever do.

Because you know what? Here's a basic fact: no one has ever become their ideal self. It's a moving target. Sisyphus's rock. It's a mirage of water on a desert road that we expend our energy trying to get to and it does nothing but create more thirst.

I am definitely not saying that God can get you to the mirage – that God can make your actual self into your ideal self. **I'm saying that the self that God has a relationship with IS your actual self.** God isn't waiting for you to become thinner, or less crazy, or more spiritual to love you. And I think the more we rely on our projects of self-improvement to save us, the less we really experience the love of God because we are too busy trying to earn what is already been freely given to us. So here's the deal. Your ideal self is not real. You are. You in all your inconsistencies and beauty. You in your sinner and saintness. You – God's beloved.

So, where does this all leave the church?

It's no news to anyone here that there is a lot of hand-wringing these days about the longevity of Christianity. And yeah – to be sure, the place of the church used to be bigger, more significant and more impressive. Sure, we used to own more property, have more members, bring in more cash and leverage more power than we do today. It's hard to argue with numbers. But the thing is, buildings, numbers, money, power – and other aspects of worldly success may indeed be signs of A kingdom, but brothers and sisters, they are not necessarily signs of THE Kingdom. And people of God, **maybe now is the time for us to take a hard look at the ways in which the church has tended to judge our success on a set of values that perhaps we had no business buying into in the first place. Namely our society's free-market corporate values of what success looks like. Perhaps Jesus wished for his church on Earth to judge themselves according to something other than the categories of late-stage capitalism ... something other than budgets and spreadsheets.**

But the church truly believing that our God is a God that brings live things out of dead things means letting go of the idea that we must preserve that which once was good. Sometimes new life comes out of the death of the very things God had done in the past.

But we need not fear the changes in the church. Not really. Because, society will still have the Fortune 500 for profits, and non profits for service and day care centers for children and the ELKS Club for socializing and Starbucks for overpriced coffee and many other things the church might not ever be able to do. But we should never judge ourselves as the church according to these things because **you know what the culture around us will NEVER do? Preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and proclaim forgiveness of sins. You know why? That's OUR job. That's our main job That's what the church is for.** We are those who have been, and continue to be, entrusted with nothing less than the Gospel.

And because of this – because THIS is what the church is really about – I'm not walking away.

At House for All Sinners and Saints, the absolution we often use goes like this: God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love loves you as you are. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit amen.

No one says that shit to me in yoga class.

And I need to hear it.

So given what we've been entrusted with, we as the church cannot be distracted any longer by a corporate Western Empire version of success.

So when folks say the church is dying ... may I suggest that we only say this when we forget what the definition of church is.

And when we forgot *whose* the church is.

Because as the prophet Isaiah said, the Word will do that for which God purposes it and people, regardless of what happens to institutions, and trends and property and budgets ... Even if old church building are more often condos or nightclubs than centers for worship, God will be praised. God will continue to send forth the Word which God has always sent forth. God will raise from stones voices to praise God's name. So let us step back from the worry of how the church is dying, because long after we have gone, the WORD will remain. Long after everything we associate with "church" is gone, the church will not be dead because people will continue to gather in the name of the Triune God, tell about the night Jesus was betrayed, hold up bread, say it is his body and that it is for the forgiveness of sins and they will hand it to their friends. Just as we will do every time we gather so will it forever be done until the time in which we gather around the throne of the Lamb.

There's an amazing track about the end of the world on David Bowie's the Ziggy Stardust album. It expresses the chaos and sentiment when an alien comes to Earth and tells humanity that we've only got 5 years left.

And it makes me wonder: what would it be like if Ziggy Stardust came to Earth and told the church we've only got 5 years. What if we knew that we had five years – that there was absolutely nothing we could do or not do that would change that. In 5 years our congregations and denominations and colleges and camps – all gone.

Meaning, what if the church were free? What if none of our efforts were put into trying to survive – then what would living look like. Imagine for a minute what being the church would look like if we had 5 years. If we could leave it all on the field. What would being church look like with that kind of freedom. After all one of Luther's favorite verses was (Galatians 5:1) "For freedom Christ has set us free ..."

Well, for one, if the game is over, we would have no reason to try and look good. We could wear our yoga pants all day, so to speak. We'd have no reason to keep a mortgage on a building we can't afford. We wouldn't have to meet on Sunday mornings even. I mean – who cares. Let's meet Tuesday nights or for lunch on Friday. Here's something: We could stop kissing up to toxic people just because they give more money than others. We could serve the neighbor. Sell all we have, give it to the poor. Melt all that brass and Weave our expensive paraments into public art. We would have no sacred cows. Nothing to be defensive about. No reason to be offended. So we could make jokes when we pray and baptize people in carnival dunk tanks and put a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font. And you know what else? We could cancel every single committee meeting and spend time in each other's homes. I think rather than arguing about communing children we'd find that children are exactly who we want to receive bread and wine from. We'd sing together more. We'd laugh more. We'd cry more. We'd celebrate Eucharist more and in what we used to think were inappropriate places. Gas stations, Bus stops, old folks homes anywhere but a cold old church building we can no longer afford.

Good people of God, believe this- that it is for freedom that Christ has made us free. Gospel people are free people and free people are dangerous people. Free people can't be easily controlled. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people see Rome for what it is.

One thing about Luther is that he was willing to lose all of it for the sake of the Gospel – he believed more in the freedom of the Christian than he did in the institution of the church.

So as we look to the next 500 years - here's the irony – I believe that the church free from preserving itself, free from defending itself, free from having to promote itself would be something others would very naturally want to be a part of. Being a people who laugh and who do not think that needing God is a failure – being a people who dance unselfconsciously – being a people who are unafraid of suffering and unafraid of joy – being people who have been freed by Christ FOR freedom – Well, ironically I think this is something our world needs in a *pastoral* way. We aren't going to attract people to the project of preserving a dying institution, that might be *our* need, but it is not a pastoral need of the people in this hurt and broken and beautiful world.

I'm grateful to the reformation. I'm grateful to the institution of the Lutheran church for it has faithfully care-taken the sacramental practices and theological framework of grace that has saved my life.

But that institution is not that in which I place my trust, or that to which I give my heart. That belongs to the Gospel.

So if I wish to leave you with anything it is this. You have every reason to be hopeful because the Word of God will continue to do that for which God purposes it, and forgiveness of sins is real, and people matter more than things, and Jesus is among us making peace, and nothing that really matters can be taken from us. We don't need Ziggy Stardust to tell us we've only got 5 years in order for us to be free. I promise you we already are because Christ has made it so.

In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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