

REFORMATION SUNDAY | OCTOBER 30, 2022

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 46 | ROMANS 3:19-28 | JOHN 8:31-36

As we were getting ready for the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reformation a few years ago, a new book came out from the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It's called *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. Or as I call it, FCCLCCCR17. If you've never read an ecumenical document like this before, most of it is spent giving very precise details of Catholic beliefs and Lutheran beliefs and then trying to see where they align with each other and where exactly they depart from one another.

But one of the nice things about this book is it also has a section at the end called "Five Ecumenical Imperatives." And it lays out five principals that should be guiding our mission and vision as a church. So if you're someone who's always asking, "How does this apply to my life?," you get some practical advice here. And we've been working through one imperative a year on Reformation Sunday since 2018, which means that this is our last one. Number five. Number five reads: "Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world."

The place to begin here is with "the mercy of God." When you hear the word "mercy," what images come to mind? Maybe it makes you think of a Law & Order rerun where a defendant asks to be shown mercy. Or maybe it makes you think of the time you were at a high school softball game, and the umpire invoked the "mercy rule." In the first case, mercy means withholding punishment due for an offense. In the latter, it means withholding the actions of a punishing offense. In both cases, mercy is mostly about *not* doing something.

The way scripture talks about mercy is a little bit different. There's a good definition in this book called *Mercy* by Walter Kasper, who has been involved in a lot of the Catholic Church's ecumenical work. He writes that "the most important expression for understanding mercy is *hesed*, which means unmerited loving kindness, friendliness, favor, and also divine grace and mercy."¹ When *hesed* is used in the Hebrew Bible, it's a way of describing God's care and kindness toward God's people. Mercy is not just the absence of punishment but the presence of care. Kasper says that mercy is all about how God turns to us.

If you want an image of that sort of mercy in the Bible, think of the parable of the prodigal son. When the son returns, the father doesn't say, "It's whatever. There's a pizza in the freezer." What does the father do? He runs down the road to welcome him home and throw him a party. That's what the mercy of God, the *hesed* of God, looks like.

But *hesed* has another important characteristic, which is one of time. When we talk about God's mercy, we're not just talking about one moment or one reaction or one decision. But we're talking about something that's happening over a long period of time. In the Hebrew Bible, *hesed* often refers to God's continuing commitment to God's people. No matter how many times we cast our gaze away from God, God turns to meet us.² Mercy isn't something God does; mercy is who God is.

That merciful turning to us is exactly what we heard in today's reading from Romans. St. Paul writes "the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe."

¹ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Paulist Press, 2013), 43.

² Simone Weil: "Sin is not a distance, it is a turning our gaze in the wrong direction."

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The central theological insight of the Reformation is that when Paul talks about the “righteousness of God” like he does in today’s reading, he’s referring to God’s mercy. The righteousness of God, being in right relationship with God, isn’t some standard of perfection that we strive to attain. We don’t bring ourselves into relationship with God. God’s righteousness is given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the fullness of God’s *hesed* or mercy for us. When God exhibits mercy, it isn’t just the “Law & Order” version where someone gets lets off the hook and things go back to normal. God turns to us, commits to us, and leads us in a transformed way of life.

So what does that have to do with us? Well, the ecumenical imperative says that we “witness together to the mercy of God through proclamation and service.” Let’s break this down and see how it works together.

The whole idea of witness is that our words and our actions, our entire lives as individuals and as a community, communicate something about God. If you want another way to think about this, imagine for a moment that someone showed up at worship one Sunday, and they knew nothing about Christian theology or practice at all, but they said they wanted to learn more. But instead of just having it explained to them or having me give them a book, they said they just wanted to watch and learn. What would that person learn about God from our actions?

They probably wouldn’t understand the finer doctrinal points of the trinity or the incarnation. But after a while, they could probably tell us an awful lot about God. They would know that God is forgiving because we gather around the font to confess our sins and hear a word of forgiveness. They would know God’s love is expansive because they would see a meal with no one left unserved. They would know that God cares for the vulnerable because they would see how we love and serve our neighbors. They would know that God calls us into relationship because they would see how we gather in community.

And that’s why it’s so important that we witness *together*. Because when we witness together, not just as Lutherans and Catholics but through any kind of ecumenical and interfaith partnership, we are communicating something important about God. Namely, that we are saying God is merciful. That because God has turned to us despite our differences, we can turn to others despite our differences as well.

After all, if we believe God has reconciled the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus, then we can be reconciled to one another as well. And when we seek partnership before division, when we seek to understand before we stereotype, and when weigh the successes of others as heavily as their shortcomings, we are saying that God is like that, too. That God builds relationships, seeks to understand, and defines us by our hopes. We’re saying that God is merciful.

Witnessing to God’s mercy by seeking reconciliation doesn’t mean that we have to agree on everything. It doesn’t mean we need to have one denomination or one church body or one hymnal. (Just imagine the committee meetings.) But it means recognizing that we have our gazes turned in the same direction, seeking the fullness of the kingdom of God in our lives and in the life of our creation. And because God continues to be merciful to us, we can commit to walking together until the fullness of God fills all in all.

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