

This day of the church year, Reformation Sunday, is unique of all the Sundays in the year in that the focus is on our identity as *believers*. And the focus is fairly specific, as you will see as I keep narrowing down these categories of belief. Today we that acknowledge that as believers go, not only do we believe in God, which makes us *theists*; not only do we believe in God, as revealed in *Christ*, which makes us *Christians*; but our Christian belief is in the form of *Lutheran* Christianity, impacted by Martin Luther, the greater Protestant reformer of the 16th C. To become even more specific, we are not merely Lutherans, but members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the ELCA---that *type* of Lutheran. This morning, as we consider the identity and faith which we have inherited, I want us to ponder with gratitude on *why it is good*---why is it good to be a believer in God? Why is it good to be a Christian? Why is it good to be a Lutheran? Why is it good to be an ELCA Lutheran? Now, here's what I really want to emphasize-- In doing so, we are not in any way critiquing or judging those who do not fall into those particular categories, and much of what we say might apply to others of faith across the board. We are not proclaiming that we alone have the truth and are superior to all others. But, here's something that the group of us who recently put together our new confirmation program noticed as we discussed our Christian and Lutheran faith---we realized that many of us don't actually know what we might call the "basics" of our faith all that well. So, it's worthwhile to clarify some of those basics, while at the same time, it is right for us to recognize, claim and celebrate our heritage. Reformation Sunday is just the perfect day to do so.

How, though, to go about this process? I decided to take a David Letterman approach and simply list the top five reasons it is good to be in any of those four categories I mentioned a moment ago, namely: a believer in God, a Christian, a Lutheran, an ELCA Lutheran. As I list the reasons I've come up with, I am really hoping that *you* are reflecting on *your own reasons* for gratitude in your faith and identity. So, you might wonder, why *do I* get to list mine out *loud* while *you* have to think yours through *silently*? It's just because I'm the preacher, and you're not. And moreover, if I opened it up to general input, which I considered for about 10 seconds, I wouldn't be able to shut you all down, and we'd never get our chance to get our kitchen back in order prior to our upcoming fishcake dinner. So, please, think through your own responses, silently and deeply, while I suggest some possible lines of thought.

First: Why is it good to be a believer in God? Here are the top five reasons I've come up with: 1. Believers in God know that the Universe has a soul, and so do they. We acknowledge that at the heart of all things, there is a Holy Love and a Holy Mystery, and that we are created in that image.

2. Believers in God have someone to thank. And when so many occasions bring forth that spontaneous "thank you", especially for fortunate people like ourselves who live on the North Shore of Lake Superior in the Autumn, we have someone to whom we can express those thanks.

3. Believers in God have someone to call on for help. Help for themselves, help for those they love, help for those they will never know or love but know of their need for help. Life is way too difficult to go through it without having Someone to call on for help.

4. Believers in God trust that there is a meaning to life. We believe that amidst the randomness and chaos that swirls all around us, there is, in fact, a purpose and a guiding power that now, or in the future, will bring meaning and design to the events we see.

5. Believers in God around the world, of different stripes and sorts, can find common ground in their belief in God, whether they be Moslem, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or so on. We don't always do it easily or well, but finding common ground is crucial to our survival, and belief in God *can* be one of the places in which we find common ground.

And that's why I am glad to be a believer in God. I'm thinking you are, too.

Moving ahead, then, to our next, more specific category of identity, why is it good to be a Christian? Without in any way demeaning people of other world faiths, why might we be glad to be a Christian?

1. We see the face of God in Christ. We believe in the Incarnation of this Almighty God of the Universe and our world into Jesus of Nazareth, so that we can put a face and name to God. We know that God is no stranger to the joys and sorrows of human life and that God's love is so great, God is among us and with us in Christ. As Christians, we believe that Christ is Emmanuel, which means God with us, which leads to the second reason for gratitude, which is:
2. We know that God is with us in suffering. We see in the crucifixion of Christ that God is intimately familiar with loneliness, betrayal, pain, humiliation and death, all of those things which we experience at one time or another. We are grateful because we

see that God is not aloof, but with us even in our pain. And that cross of pain leads to reason 3 for gratitude, which is a result of the crucifixion, namely:

3. Christ's Resurrection, which turns us into Easter people. We believe in resurrected life after death, that even death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We believe that powerful though sin and evil and darkness are, the Resurrection demonstrates once and for all, that love wins. And if love wins, that means that there is a 4th reason to rejoice in being a Christian, namely:
4. Forgiveness. We are people of forgiveness. People who claim and share the mercy of God. People who believe in second chances, new starts, and that nothing is broken beyond repair. Believing in forgiveness gives us hope of reconciliation not only with God but with other people, which leads to a fifth reason it is good to be a Christian:
5. Community in Christ. The Christian community extends around the world, and is in fact, the largest single faith community in our world. That gives us tremendous potential and power to be about good and redemption in this world, the callings Christ gives us.

I could come up with many more reasons, but these are the top five reasons I am glad to be a Christian. How about you?

Now, becoming more specific yet, Christians come in many different sizes, shapes, and designs. I, in fact, started life as a Christian of the Methodist persuasion, and I have very fond memories of that upbringing. Nevertheless, I became a Lutheran on purpose during my college

years. Why am I glad to be a *Lutheran* Christian? The reasons I give are true to what I know of Lutherans; the fact that I name them in conjunction with Lutheranism does not mean that they are not also true of many or most other Christian denominations. Most of them are common to all Christians, but it's often a matter of emphasis or flavor, and in highlighting these five flavors in terms of Lutheran flavor, I am not faulting the flavors of the other denominations. (We all get that, right?) I'm simply saying that these are reasons to celebrate being a Lutheran Christian:

1. We take the Bible seriously. We believe the Bible is inspired by God and continues to be a way in which the grace of God is extended to us. We see the Bible as the cradle of Christ, the living Word of God. Lutherans were among the first in Reformation times to translate, distribute, and study Scripture, and to claim that the grace found in Scripture should be personally known to every Christian.

2. We take the Gospel seriously, which means that we are people of grace. We see that the grace of God underlies all of our human efforts to know and love God. We see that the grace of God is fundamental to any relationship we have with God, and so we become vessels of God's grace for other people.

3. We take worship and the Sacraments seriously. We gather every Sunday, utilizing a wide variety of worship styles, yet mostly with common elements that date back to the earliest centuries of church history. We believe that in baptism and communion we receive the grace of God which we take so seriously. We have outstanding traditions of worship, church music, and preaching.

4. We take education seriously. As part of the Reformation, Luther and other reformers believed that the average person should be able to read, and should be able to read not only God's word, but other words. We have a legacy of educating both clergy and non-clergy, which continues this day through our support of colleges, seminaries, scholarship programs for education, and studies done at congregational levels.

5. We take a theology of the cross seriously. We see the crucifixion of Christ as being central to the story of God's interaction with humanity. We believe that the way of the cross is one of humble service and self-sacrificing love, and we see those as qualities we seek to embody. We understand that God seeks the sinful, the broken, and the suffering, and that also need to do so.

These are all reasons I am glad to be a Lutheran Christian.

But, finally, to arrive at our most specific category for this morning, how do I feel about being a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, that particular type of Lutheran? Because there are all kind of Lutherans, you know. Free Lutherans, Apostolic Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, and so on. But we are ELCA Lutherans. All Lutherans have many strengths, and I'm not suggesting that the reasons I give are unique *only* to the ELCA, just that they *are true* for the ELCA and may be an emphasis for us in particular. Why am I glad to be a member of the ELCA?

1. We have a wonderful balance between the authority of the central denominational structure and the authority of individual congregations. Most of the authority in our structure rests within congregations. We have the authority to call our clergy, to elect

our officers and council, to decide on how to disburse our offerings, and so on. But we also have a central body that allows us to have resources for educated clergy, for materials for Sunday School, stewardship, conflict resolution or whatever we might require, and that provides a way to gather together in strength to address weighty issues and needs in our world.

2. We talk about difficult issues in a civil, deliberate manner. Yes, sometimes we tire of hearing about whatever the latest social statement debate is about, and often the process we use to discuss such issues seems lengthy and complicated. But we do it. We discuss things like sexual identity, medical ethics, environmental issues, end of life decisions, genetic research, domestic abuse, and more, and we do it in a measured, respectful manner. In this polarized, angry world, that's a big deal.
3. We have an outstanding outreach in terms of social services within our own country, for example, Lutheran Social Services, and also in terms of response to world wide needs, as through our ELCA Hunger Appeal and our Lutheran Disaster Relief Response. Our agencies providing aid, relief, counseling, and assistance are literally respected throughout our nation and our world. We make a difference.
4. We are in relationship with the other Evangelical Lutheran Church bodies throughout the world, whether in Honduras, China, Russia, or India. We are a part of a *world* community through our affiliation with the ELCA. We have delegations come and share with us, because we recognize that we don't have all the answers and some of those Evangelical Lutheran Churches are far more effective in certain areas than we

are and we can learn from them. We also send delegations to other places to share what we have to share, including our means and people power. We're part of the world community through the ELCA.

5. And finally, we believe that the Gospel compels us to announce that all are welcome. We are an open and welcoming branch of the church of Christ. I know I wouldn't want it any other way, and I suspect you wouldn't either. We can put "wherever you are in your journey of faith, you are welcome here" in our bulletin every Sunday, and we mean it. Your race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, or appearance will not exclude you from our gathering to worship. Whether you are ELCA or not, you are welcome. Whether you are Lutheran or not, you are welcome. Whether you are Christian or not, you are welcome here. Whether you even believe in God with 100% certainty 24/7 or have your moments of doubt like most of us do, you are welcome here. And we know for a fact that this is not our table, it is the Lord's table, and all are welcome. That's the Gospel, and that's who we are in living out the Gospel. And I'm glad about that.

This Reformation morning, then, we rejoice both in people of diverse faiths throughout the world, but also in our own particular faith identity, for which we owe a debt of gratitude towards those who came before us. Today and most days, I am grateful to be a believer in God, a Christian, a Lutheran, and a member of the ELCA.

I hope you may also have a renewed appreciation for your faith identity. Thanks be to
God! Amen.