

Augustana Heritage Association
Lansdale, June 26, 2016
Sermon: Jonas Jonson, Diocese of Strängnäs, em.

Jer. 31,31-34; Rom 3, 19-28; John 8, 31-36

Liberated by God's Grace

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In Europe, in the US, and in other parts of the world, there is one clear tendency: authoritarianism. Be it in Russia or China, Sweden or Hungary, political parties and populist politicians proclaim a new and excluding nationalism and their followers increase in numbers. Fences are erected, borders are controlled, and nations protect themselves against waves of immigrants and refugees. In Sweden, people ask for more rules and regulations, school discipline, sanctions and security. "Law and order" has become the mantra of our prime minister. Socio-psychological research confirms the trend: a new authoritarianism is on its way. Increasingly people choose obedience and submission rather than individual responsibility and freedom. World religions of all kinds seek to control the thinking and morality of their followers at the expense of individual freedom. As we are gathered here today, the future of the European Union is an open question after the British referendum. You all know what is at stake in your upcoming presidential election.

This is today's environment in which the gospel must be proclaimed. It always had a critical edge. Facing the new situation, this edge becomes even sharper, and the gospel itself in one sense turns into a political message defending freedom, human rights, and democracy.

What is the Good News to us in the Scripture readings today? As always it is amnesty, a liberation from bonds of sin and guilt, an undeserved grace, and a life of abundant blessing. This is what we are given, this is what we celebrate as Christian believers. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, has set us free, and we are free indeed. We are justified by grace through the redemptive work of Christ Jesus. This truth has made us free.

Again and again Jesus tells us: Fear not! (*μη φοβου!*). You are truly liberated by God's grace. Trust it! Don't let the authorities of the world or propriety bind you in fear and prevent you from doing what is right. "The law of the Lord is written in your hearts," says Jeremiah. "You will know the truth. And the truth will make you free," says Jesus. "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God," says the apostle. We are free women and men, free to live and to love. As Christian believers, and as Lutherans, we say Amen!

Since the days of the Reformation, the Church has proudly and persistently proclaimed justification by faith. This conviction has often been compromised by doctrinal fundamentalism or pietistic moralism. It became church dividing, when Protestants claimed it over against others, particularly Catholics. But when Lutherans realized, that justification was not a confessional property but the universal gift of God to all, our churches – including the Augustana Synod – became prepared to participate fully in ecumenism, the ecumenism which has transformed Christianity, confirmed the fellowship of churches, and made them a voice of human dignity and peace in the world. With the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed by the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran churches around the world in 1999, we are back to basics: that true evangelical faith is true catholic faith.

In Chicago in 1923, Archbishop Nathan Söderblom stated this clearly: When we are graced by the pure gospel, we become catholic in name and purpose, because catholic means universal, and only the true gospel makes the church universal. Christianity as a whole is catholic to the extent that it is true to the Saviour, he said.

This is what *Confessio Augustana*, presented to the emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg on June 25, 1530, was all about. With the Augsburg Confession, the defenders of the Reformation demonstrated that they shared the faith and doctrine of the early fathers and mothers of the undivided, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and they had no intention of breaking their unity with the Roman Catholic Church of the time. Their program was not division but reform.

Access to the living Word and the Sacraments of salvation should constitute catholicity; unity take precedence over uniformity.

486 years have passed since then. We recall this event today in order to commit ourselves anew to the visible unity of the church.

Three weeks ago, I was in Rome celebrating with tens of thousands of pilgrims the canonization of Mother Elisabeth Hesselblad. She is the first officially recognized Swedish saint since Saint Birgitta in the 14th century; she died in 1957. Mother Elisabeth renewed the Birgittine Order in a remarkable way, and now she is included among those who “by their lives have demonstrated that God is a living God,” again to quote Söderblom. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized that she had been brought up in a faithful Lutheran home in Sweden, before she became a Roman Catholic in New York and went to Rome to fulfill her vocation. As Lutherans we rejoice that her faith set her free to serve God and the poor with an undivided heart. And we rejoice that her life has become a sign of unity between our churches.

By God’s grace we are free to love God and to respond to the needs of others, free to contribute to the creation of an open and inclusive community, called to shape a human and just society, and to be stewards of God’s creation. Historically, Lutherans have – we must admit – often been misled to separate creation from salvation, life from faith, justice from justification, and to submit to false authorities. But despite many setbacks, the Reformation sowed the seeds of individual freedom and liberal democracy, of values to protect and re-capture in every generation.

May the Gospel of the Lord not fall on deaf ears! Salvation is not for sale in a religious market, but it is God’s free gift to us and to all. Human beings are not for sale, but created in the image of God with equal right to food and shelter, education and health. Creation is not for sale, not for human domination, not for exploitation for consumerist commodities. We have every reason for anxiety and fear when we think of the state of our fragile world with its violence, global

warming, wars and greed. But we trust in God, who proves his love for sinners, saving us through Jesus Christ.

We stand here as people who have received Christ as the truth, as people liberated from the oppression of convention and fear, forgiven in order to forgive. Together with sisters and brothers in every nation, we pray for courage to face the future with confidence and hope since we have tasted God's grace. After 500 years, we can see with our own eyes how evangelical and Roman Catholic believers together confirm justification by faith and also share in the same interpretation of Reformation history. The intent and purpose of the Augsburg Confession is coming true in our time! As never before the unity and the catholicity of the church is realized. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad, here in Lansdale, and along with the people of God from all around the world.

Amen.

May God through the Holy Spirit keep the word of life in our hearts.