



Texts in Context

A Word in the Grave: Reformation Sunday and New Life

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I. DEATH IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

IN THE 1850s, WALT WHITMAN WROTE, “I SING THE BODY ELECTRIC,/THE ARMIES
of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,/They will not let me off till I go
with them, respond to them,/And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the
charge of the soul.”¹ In the 1960s, I learned to sing of a different body electric as
death drew its unblinking eye my way. On a balmy June morning, my older sister
and I were participating in a traditional western South Dakota kids’ summer activ-
ity, namely, running through the sprinkler. The flat green hose hissed sprays of wa-
ter in the grass alongside the eight-wide trailer house where we lived. As we ran
back and forth through our private fountain, we squealed with delight at the cold
of the water against our warm skin, and we sang with delight in life, unsuspecting
and unharried by death.

My sister skipped over to a tree in the corner of the lot to set up a pretend
schoolroom in the shade. Barefoot and sodden, I moved around the front of the
trailer and placed a hand on the mobile home’s hitch, intending to swing around it
and go inside for a drink of water. But a stream of shorted electricity, which was
now routed through the hitch, had a powerful alternative idea. It grabbed me as a

¹Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric,” in *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

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more conductive path to the ground and refused to relinquish me. I felt the zap and sizzle of electric shock coursing through my whole body. The hitch held me like a magnet; I fought to free myself, but could only remove one hand. I was unacquainted with the word electrocution, but I knew the word death and felt it twitching my muscles and sucking the air out of my lungs.

Although such instances of electrocution are, thank God, rare enough, other situations of death's grabbing hold in the midst of life are all too common. Any pastor worth a lick knows you don't have to scratch very hard to get down under the surface of smiles and light, where death's electromagnetic field flows free and where human beings work to free themselves from its buzzing grip. Death, with its sinful sting, remains the locus of a pastor's attention: the heads of about-to-be-filled graves, the shadowy recesses of a parishioner's despair, the chasms of eroded relationships.

The struggle against death shows itself in other places within congregations, too. Taking a leave from call for graduate study, I have become a regular pew-sitter and sermon-hearer in a delightful congregation where death sits silent, knowing its time inevitably will come. Peace Lutheran Church is a tiny place in Lauderdale, a one-mile-square, first-ring St. Paul suburb. It is surrounded not by the mushrooming multigabled homes and huge lots of the outer suburbs but by squat little postwar houses built by the hard-working laboring classes forty and fifty years ago.

The congregation, of course, regularly faces death in its usual guises. But there is one unique question about death with which Peace and many other small congregations like it must contend: the congregation's long-term viability. Peace's neighborhood has a significant number of people living there on their way to something else and an increasing immigrant population. The congregation's membership has dwindled from its peak back before a dispute with its former judicatory bodies and a decision to transfer its affiliation to another national church body. There are many members who have long-time family connections; a majority, though still vital and active, face old age's declining health (albeit with much grace and good humor). While some in the congregation must face death as a nearby reality, as the body of Christ in Lauderdale we also wonder on occasion how to keep the congregation alive beyond that generation of staunchly faithful older folk.

We recognize that there are other larger congregations singing their siren hymns just a short drive away, each of which is a-bustle with programs intentionally designed to meet the multiple needs of the SUV-driving suburban family. We know that the wheelchairs and walkers present at worship are no sign of a baby boom among us. Although the congregational counterpart to hospice care remains a good piece away, we tend to check our vital signs more often of late. For a congregation in such a place, the texts assigned for Reformation Sunday are a helpful bunch, for they meet our fretting about the continuing life of the congregation head-on and work to free us from it with their strong promise.

II. FREEDOM IN THE MIDST OF DEATH

In John 8, the chapter from which the Gospel reading for Reformation Sunday is taken, Jesus encounters a woman caught in the sin of adultery. She stands under the condemnation of the law, and as the Pharisees grip rocks, ready to stone her, she no doubt hears death's loud yawp barking in her ears. Christ speaks to the Pharisees first, bringing them under the law's judgment as well: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). Some manuscripts also add that Jesus started writing their sins in the dirt beneath his sandals. When the Pharisees scurry away from this all-too-bright light shining on their sin, Jesus speaks to the woman, pointing out that her accusers have fled the truth. For the one who knows her sin, he offers only mercy: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Jesus, in the Gospel lesson, offers his own commentary on the encounter with the adulterous woman. He says to his disciples and to the believing Jews, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free....So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." The freedom he bestowed on the adulterous woman allowed her the freedom to walk away into a new life unbound by death, the judgment brought by her sin. Here he brings the same freedom to those following him. Freedom, he says, comes only through an encounter with the one who is the way, the life, and (in this passage) the truth. Only Christ himself, the Son of God, has the power to bring the reality of sin and death into the light; only he can bring the full measure of God's mercy to bear on those under the law's judgment.

Such freedom in the midst of death comes only by means of faith, by trusting the divine promise, the word that Jesus embodies. Those whom Jesus encounters in John (the adulterous woman, the lame man at Bethsaida, and even three-days-dead Lazarus) receive their new life on account of Jesus' word. Here he tells his followers that being steeped in his word is what brings them his freedom-bestowing truth: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (v. 31). It is not enough to acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher or to hang out on the corner with him because his company is so pleasant; rather, to continue in his word is to be gripped by it, pulled in and fed by it. Later in John, Jesus will liken it to life as a cluster of grapes:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:5-7)

The language of remaining and abiding is inherently relational, which is the essence of faith. Luther gave a picture of such a relationship in his description of the *fröhliche Wechsel* (happy exchange).

By the wedding ring of faith [Christ] shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died and descended into hell that he might overcome them all....[T]he believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom.²

In John's language in the Gospel reading, this same happy exchange comes by means of the word. It cannot happen by wrenching oneself into proper religious shape, but instead occurs via an external word bringing faith. The gospel promise of new life, freedom, and mercy in Christ Jesus continually creates faith and trust in its hearers. Or as Luther proclaimed in the *Small Catechism* (1529):

I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.³

III. REMAINING IN THE WORD

It is a great temptation for sinners to mistrust the promise of a word that brings life and freedom. The believers who followed Jesus were susceptible to such temptation, too, even when they had just heard the promise from Christ's own lips. Their response to Jesus' proclamation in John 8 is to doubt their own need for freedom: "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free?'" (v. 33). It is the old temptation that both the first commandment and the first article of the creed speak against: seeking life and freedom apart from the one who creates and preserves our bodies and souls with all their powers.⁴

At Peace Lutheran Church and in the smaller congregations I have served, our temptation is to look for life apart from the word in which Jesus tells us we must remain. We find security in the mere fact of the congregation's continued existence or in having an ongoing social relationship with this particular group of church folk. We begin to wonder if we ought to gear ourselves up with some new programs or worship fads that will bring in new people and, thus, increase our numbers or at least maintain our current membership. If we look like a busy, active, and attractive place, people will visit, people will stay, and more people will follow doing the same. We thereby find a secure future and avoid the possibility of the death of the congregation and our security in it.

²Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957) 352.

³Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore J. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.

⁴*Ibid.*

These temptations are by no means unique to Peace Lutheran Church; they appear in small open-country parishes and inner city congregations whose membership has missed the boom times. Suburban church growth strategies sometimes seem undergirded by some sort of apart-from-the-word thinking in which bustle and frantic activity substitute for faithfulness and life. The difference between Peace and a congregation located in a wildly exploding subdivision built on the bullish economy of the Clinton era is that we do not have the financial resources or the critical mass of young professionals and couples starting families to act on our temptations. We all stand in the busy stream of American life, imagining that, if it works at McDonalds, supersizing must work for the church. Bigger must be better. More is an appropriate goal. The problem is that the Gospel for Reformation Sunday tells us that it is not remaining busy or growing that brings life and freedom, but remaining in the word. Nor does the new life described in John come, in the wider church, from either the strict biblicism or historic structures that Lutheranism in America seems to have chosen as a response to the death of the age of the immigrant church in the last thirty years. The word of the gospel is what brings life, it is what links us to Christ, and it is what allows us to abide in him. Congregations and whatever busy-ness they have the wherewithal to produce will come and go (the decline of the once vital church in northern Africa, including Saint Augustine's own congregation in Hippo, is just one example), but the word of God endures forever.

My experience in electricity's grip ended by my being grasped by a greater power: my sister, the songbird. Just a moment before I first touched the live trailer hitch, the two of us had been singing at the top of our lungs. But these were not the usual children's songs we sang. My sister, she of the skinny pre-adolescent legs and ripe-wheat shock of hair, had attended church kindergarten, learned the church's hymnody there, and passed it my way before I could even read. Drenched in water, we sang "My faith looks up to Thee," "Immortal, invisible, God only wise," and "Hallelujah! Jesus lives!" rather than ditties about the muffin man and that bridge in London. As I struggled to release myself, I screamed for her help, but the electricity had sapped all the power from my voice. My sister was outside my field of vision, but now I heard her approaching singing. Her hand grabbed my arm as her voice sang what will ever be the dearest hymn in my canon: "I know that my redeemer lives!" At that moment I was free. Not knowing in what great jeopardy she had placed her own life, my sister rescued me (and with the finest bit of proclamation on her lips). I crumpled in a weak heap; she pulled me up and said, "Let's go inside and play." As Jesus said to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

The first two lessons assigned for Reformation Sunday hit the same freeing, resurrecting note. Jer 31:31-34 reiterates Luther's theme of the bride and groom in the *fröhliche Wechsel*. Although Israel had broken the covenant with God, her husband, the Lord, will "put my law within them, and I will write it on their

hearts...[T]hey shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (vv. 32b, 34b). The intimate knowledge of the God who longs for them will come to the Israelites not through a covenant of law but in the truth of the divine word of forgiveness. The fullness of what God promised their ancestors Abraham and Sarah comes now through this eternally patient promise of mercy.

Paul plays a counterpoint with his theological language in Rom 3:19-28, from which comes Article 4, the core of the *Augsburg Confession*, of Reformation Sunday’s proclamation, and of Luther’s theology: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (v. 28). The business of forgiveness, mercy, and new life does not come under the auspices of the adulterous woman’s willingness to sleep alone, from congregational programs no matter how well-intentioned, or from our personal protestations of good intent. Paul (with Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon in lockstep next to him) says that the new life to which we bear witness on Reformation Sunday rests entirely in God’s hands. There lies the answer to Peace Lutheran’s *sub rosa* fretting about its future and an affirmation of the ministry already present there.

IV. FREEDOM FOR WHAT?

If Luther’s proclamation of justification by faith is true, if Christ’s promise in John 8 is true, and if the good news of Jeremiah and Romans is true (and they all are), then my little congregation’s life is not in doubt. Peace Lutheran is part of God’s future because it has called a fine and faithful preacher who delivers us from bondage to sin every single Sunday. In the absolution and the sermon, the sacraments and the liturgy we are hid in Christ and him crucified. Unless they were looking to remain in Christ’s word, most folks used to the glitter and flash of American popular culture would not call us an alluring place. But lack of programs only serves to prevent us from the pretense of ever thinking that by our own understanding or effort we believe in Jesus and come to him. Knowing that a congregation’s long-term life is never more than tenuous (although we hope and pray that God will continue to find the word preached at Peace both faithful and useful) keeps us from thinking that *we* call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify those who walk through the front doors. And it allows us to begin serving others rather than having the goal of our life together be our own survival.

The lessons for Reformation Sunday simply do not allow us to imagine that our salvation and new life come under our own power. If we are dead in sin and are raised on account of Christ, we have nothing to lose. We are free. Luther, in *The Freedom of a Christian*, described the Christian life with two contradictory statements:

A Christian is a perfect lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁵

⁵Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 344.

Jesus promises in John 8, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Steeped in the word, Peace Lutheran Church is fully free and yet enslaves itself in service to those who are dying to hear the gospel. Banding together with similar congregations throughout our metropolitan synod, Peace faithfully and joyfully gathers seventh- and eighth-graders to hear the gospel in confirmation. It works with those other congregations to feed the hungry in a Loaves and Fishes program. In conjunction with the nearest elementary school, it provides classes for parents of upper-elementary school children. In a giant leap into God’s future, the congregation is making major changes in its building to provide access to God’s word for all who come to hear.

Thank God we have already been freed from death and raised by and remain in God’s word. We are already dead and alive, and don’t have to worry about whether the congregation will live or die. If it were not so, we would never have time for our neighbor or for the freeing word that gives us life. That is what we do, week in, week out. To sing of the body of Christ electric, gripped by the power of his word and receiving new life that streams from him, is the best kind of Reformation celebration. ⊕