

SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 24, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA
REFORMATION 500 SERMON SERIES #2
THE LUTHERAN FAMILY TREE (or, why are there so many Lutheran church
bodies?)
TEXTS: Acts 2.44-47; Psalm 90.1-6, 16-17; John 17.6-12

I am a fan of the 1980's TV series *Cheers!* My favorite episode is the one where Woody, the bartender, comes into the bar while he's supposed to be on his honeymoon. Everyone asks him what he's doing there.
Woody: Kelly and I found out we're from different religions.
Frasier (psychiatrist): I thought you both were Lutheran.
Woody: I thought so too. Turns out she's LCA and I'm Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. If we had children, they'd be half-breeds!

To save their marriage, Woody decides to "convert" to Kelly's religion.

Now, I think this is hysterical, but only people who know Lutherans would really understand the differences between LCA (or ELCA) and the LC-MS. What it means to be Lutheran varies for each of us.

As we learned last Sunday in the opening of this series, the reform movement of the 16th century began with Martin Luther in Germany, but eventually spread throughout Europe. As these Europeans began to immigrate to the United States, they brought their religious practices with them, but soon learned that they would have to adapt them to their new country.

The story of Lutheranism in North America begins in 1640. The Swedish government was developing a small settlement near Wilmington, DE and needed someone to attend to the spiritual needs of the Swedish immigrants, so a pastor was sent. But a more sustained presence would wait for another 100 years or so. Germans, who were fleeing poor conditions in their homeland, began arriving in America in the 1680s, with most settling in Pennsylvania, upstate New York and the southern colonies. There was no provision for pastoral leadership until 1741, when Lutherans in Pennsylvania issued a call to one Melchior Muhlenberg.

Muhlenberg arrived in Philadelphia in 1742, and he went right to work laying the foundations for what would become the Lutheran church in America. Muhlenberg helped congregations to organize and call pastors, and he called into existence the first North American organization of Lutherans, the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, in 1748. The Ministerium remained a strong influence in the Lutheran community for many years. Muhlenberg also helped to prepare a standard liturgy and create a constitution. He even contributed deeply to a hymnal published in 1786.

Lutherans kept coming to the States from different European lands. Each group brought with them their own languages, cultural traditions and worship styles. They formed congregations, established institutions of mercy (hospitals, nursing homes, social ministry organizations), and founded schools, colleges and universities. As more and more Lutherans came to the US, more and more church bodies were formed – each with their unique set of values and traditions and theological bents. These groups differed

over how to interpret the scriptures, whether to worship in English or in their native tongues, whether congregations should have autonomy (power) or be under the law of a bishop, as well as societal issues like slavery and prohibition.

In 1817, the year that marked the 300th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses, there were already 650 Lutheran congregations. Soon after, in 1826, the first Lutheran seminary was founded just down the road in Gettysburg, PA by renowned theologian Samuel Simon Schmucker.

As relations among the synods improved during the 20th century, independent church groups merged to form a more unified Lutheran church in the US. These included the United Lutheran Church in America (1918); National Lutheran Church Council (1919); American Lutheran Conference (1930) / Church (1960); and the Lutheran Church in America, of which this congregation was a part (1962). The present-day Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed in 1988 from the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, making it the 4th largest Protestant denomination at the time.

While the majority of Lutherans worldwide still live in Northern Europe, and while the number of Americans claiming to be Lutheran has been on the decline for many years, Lutheranism is growing rapidly in other parts of the world. Today there are almost as many Lutherans in Asia and the Middle East as there are in North America, and there are more Lutherans in Africa than there are in Germany. But even in the US, Lutherans are growing more diverse and multi-cultural. In the Metro-NY Synod alone, worship services are offered in 12 different languages every Sunday.

One might question why we need national church bodies at all. What do we get from them? Well, lots of things, really (although I can only speak for what I know, which is the ELCA). For one, we get properly trained and examined pastors and deacons. We get programs that support our youth and young families, missionaries who serve in every corner of the world, outdoor ministries and campus ministries. The ELCA and LC-MS work together in helping victims of natural disasters and other world problems both in our country and around the world through Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran World Relief. We feed the hungry through ELCA World Hunger Program, and we voice our concerns to legislators through our state and national Lutheran Advocacy ministries. ELCA-related book publishers provide new publications, VBS, Sunday School and confirmation curriculum, worship resources and a host of other published materials.

Just like families fight, congregations and church bodies have had their differences. As we read in our text today from John, Jesus prayed that all his followers might be one, and we are guilty of creating and maintaining divisions over often-petty differences. We often see our neighboring churches as competition rather than opportunities for collaboration. And we are hesitant to see what the needs are of the people living beyond the walls of this building for fear that they might be different from us.

At the same time, the ELCA throughout its history has worked tirelessly to find common ground with our Christian brothers and sisters. We have formal agreements with nearly all of the mainline denominations, and we continue talks with the Roman

Catholic church to find common ground, particularly in this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation.

So it is our divisions that make up so many church bodies which bear the name Lutheran. But what we hold in common is the same thing that Luther found most important: Jesus Christ. We continue to cling to Jesus' desire that all may be one.