

“AFFIRMING FAITH: LESSONS FROM LUTHERANISM”  
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He must have been a mere shadow of his former self as lay there in the damp chill of a German winter. Old for his era, he'd suffered from digestive problems for most of his life, sapping his energy and causing, with little warning, dizziness to the point of fainting. Kidney and bladder stones had plagued him for decades; those, he could manage. But not the recurring heart problems. And not the stroke.

And, now, rendered nearly speechless, he begins the prayer of the dying as taught to him by the very church that had excommunicated him some twenty years before. He would die, deep in the damp February of 1546, a bitter and harsh man.

But that “old” man would become bigger in death than in life. Neither his friends nor his enemies could have predicted the impact of his life and work upon the entire Western world; although his was by no means the first or only voice raised against Mother Church, Martin Luther is among the rare historical figures whose life lives up to his legend.

This is the second of a two-part series about the Roman Catholic and Lutheran influences in Unitarian Universalism. If you suffered through last week's sermon, you may recall that I gave four ways in which the Catholic emphasis on tradition has become part of our faith: style, sacraments, symbols and spirit. My main point was that the way we worship, how we mark life's passages, use images and pay attention to our souls as well as our minds – all these still bear the fingerprints of the Roman Catholic Church. The bottom line was this: those of

us for whom liberal religion is our way of being in the world have a good deal more in common with our parent church than we either know or admit. And, to quote yet again from that source of profound wisdom, Martha Stewart, that can be a good thing.

But if Catholicism is our spiritual mother, Lutheranism is surely our spiritual stepfather. We could argue about if and how Unitarianism and Universalism might have developed without the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance it spawned, but the fact of the matter is that any direct line drawn from the Roman tradition to our own must pass through Lutheranism. And any discussion of Lutheranism must move us through Catholic tradition to Lutheran faith.

William Rehnquist; Loni Anderson; Lou Gehrig; Kant; Dana Carvey; John Updike; Lute Olson; Pachelbel

What John Wesley is to Methodism; what John Calvin is to Presbyterianism; what Arius is to Unitarianism and Origen, to Universalism, Martin Luther is to the faith that carries his name. To give him a more modern spin, Luther was a Protestant before Protestant was cool...except for the fact that he opposed everything Protestant. (Imagine his reaction to the news that some 30 separate synods bear his name.) Who was this enigma, Martin Luther?

Luther was born to working class parents on November 10, 1483. Driven by his father to become a lawyer, he entered law school only to drop out and refer to the school as a “beerhouse and a whorehouse.”

Neurotic, but brilliant, he from an early age had a sense of a deeply stained soul – a stain so deep as to become a cloistered monk at age 21. But not even the ascetic life of work, prayer, pilgrimage and fasting could relieve his feelings of shame and sinfulness. Swearing before God that his story of being struck by lightning was not a lie, he responded to what he believed was a wakeup call from

God; he became a priest (1507) and then a professor at Wittenberg (1512). It was his study of the Christian scriptures (New Testament) that kindled the fire of faith as the way to God.

Hubert Humphrey; Bach; Ann-Margaret; Elmer Anderson; Robert; Al Kaline; Bonhoeffer; Jesse Ventura

The name, Martin Luther, would likely mean nothing to us today were it not for a series of events, many of which were put into motion by Luther, himself. Using passages from Paul's letters, he began attacking Leo X's representative to Germany, Johann Tetzel, for using indulgences to raise money for the completion of St. Peter's Basilica. (Indulgences involved shortening the time one (or one's dead loved ones) would spend in purgatory. The more cynical historians refer to the practice in Monopoly terms: a "pass-go" or "get-out-of-jail-free" card for the deceased.)

Had he stopped there, he might have remained just one more heretic. But he didn't. He taught that penance is not necessary, for faith and grace are available to all. (This objection also weakened the power of the clergy.) He refuted the celibacy of the priesthood. (At the age of 42 he married Katharina Von Bora, a 26-year-old nun whom he helped escape a heresy trial by hiding her in a herring barrel. The couple would raise 6 children.) And perhaps most threatening to the Vatican, he denied the doctrine of papal infallibility.

Not satisfied to contain his radical teachings to the classroom, Luther began circulating theological letters throughout Germany. It was from these letters that he drew up the famous Ninety-Five Thesis that was posted on the church door at Wittenberg. The Thesis paper took just two weeks to circulate through Germany, two months for Europe. Suffice it to say the official Vatican response was less than enthusiastic.

Pope Leo X issued an order for Luther to recant 41 of his Ninety-Five Theses no later than 90 days after the edict was received. Luther publicly burned the edict, prompting Pope Leo to excommunicate the renegade priest and teacher.

It was left to the secular authorities to deal with heretics, so in 1521 Luther was tried in the city of Worms. Johann Eck, representing the pope, laid out Luther's books and asked him if the books were his. Luther's yes-answer was all that was needed to condemn him, which, in addition to excommunication, meant that anyone who harmed or even killed him would not be punished.

But a local Saxon governor gave Martin Luther safe quarters, having him grow a beard and pose as a knight. It was under Frederick III's care that Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German. During that year, Luther began to articulate a coherent theology of love and faith and grace.

It was during that same year that rebellious monks, priests and students from Wittenberg started an uprising, smashing church windows, statues and images. Luther was firmly opposed to any social or political revolution, but even the people's hero could not stop what became the Peasants' War (1524). Siding with the Church and secular authorities, Luther called for the nobility to put down the rebellion no matter the cost. The reformer was outraged that the poor and illiterate would use his name and work in such a crude way; he now found himself a friend of the "Establishment" of his day, at least on the matter of the Reformation.

Bruce Willis; Harold Stassen; Schweitzer; Dave Winfield; Tillich; Sally Struthers; Robert Bly; Lee Harvey Oswald

While the Protestant Reformation gained traction in Germany and beyond, Luther returned to writing as a way to fend off the radicals who used his work as a springboard for their uprising. He defended most of the Roman Catholic liturgy; he was a strong influence on the Augsburg Confession, the statement of faith still

in use among Lutherans today; he wrote the Little Catechism for laity, and the Big Catechism for clergy; more curiously, he advocated polygamy, citing the Hebrew scriptures as his authority; and, after initial efforts to convert them did not pan out, Luther began a ferocious and sustained attack against Judaism, calling it a religion of “whores, filth and swine”. (He called for the burning of all synagogues and the eradication of all Jews who would not leave Germany. Hitler sometimes quoted Luther when attempting to justify the “Final Solution”.)

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church began defining itself in order to fend off the spread of what was now being called Protestantism. The Council of Trent met three times between 1545 and 1563, clarifying official Catholic teachings and condemning all manner of heresy. Thus we can see that the seeds of our own organized European versions of heresy were planted as scholars began to dissent from Rome’s doctrines.

Back to the image of that frail and failing man, lying awake and praying the final prayer of the dying. He will die in the night and be buried beneath the pulpit of Castle Church, Wittenberg. (It was on the door of that church – a kind of bulletin board of the day – that he posted his Ninety-Five Theses.) And in his mind, Last Rites or no, he will die a Roman Catholic; Wesley died an Anglican, not a Methodist; Calvin died in the Reformed tradition, not the Presbyterian or Baptist; and so it was that Luther died with a Catholic prayer on his lips.

Steve Jobs; Henrik Ibsen; Felicity Huffman; William H. Macy; Paul Molitor; Garrison Keillor; Tom Landry; Troy Aikman; Michele Bachman; Dr. Seuss

Just two more things before we complete this overview of Lutheranism. First, it’s worth our time to know something about the different stripes of Lutheranism; in this region where one’s religion is often seen as a defining characteristic, it behooves us to know the difference between the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. And given the distinct differences

among and within the local denominations that bear the mark of Martin Luther, perhaps a quick summary and comparisons are in order.

Second, I'll close with a few thoughts about how Lutheranism has shaped liberal religion and sometimes challenges us to do some serious soul stretching.

Folks, there are some 70 million Lutherans worldwide. (If you'll grant me an "I ain't from around here" observation, I'd estimate that at least half of them live in southern Minnesota!) Although my sources differ as to the exact number of independent Lutheran synods across the globe, 30 is the average number.

You and I live at one of the crossroads of the three largest Lutheran bodies in the world: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS). Fact is, it's hard to drive ten miles in any direction without coming across a Lutheran church of one variety or another. But are we interested in becoming theologically literate enough to distinguish among them? Are we up for understanding our Lutheran neighbors' beliefs and practice despite the many flash points of difference? And, if not, are we willing to risk being accused of theological and social isolation?

Right quick, let's get a "big picture" look at three Lutheran traditions.

Let's begin with a list of beliefs they hold in common, most of which can be traced directly to that man recognized in all three bodies as "Dr. Luther". The ELCA, LCMS and WELS statements of belief share the following:

- A Trinitarian theology
- Recognition of the three historical creeds of orthodox Christianity: the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian

- The authority of the Augsburg Confession (a statement of belief and other official church documents that help make up a uniquely Lutheran theology)
- The authority of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures
- Baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments
- Salvation as an act of faith, not the result of accumulating good works (deeds, penance, etc.)

As best I can discern, these beliefs have made up the core of Lutheran theology since Martin Luther began spreading them. But let's not leave things in the general. Let's talk a few particulars.

The Wisconsin Synod (WELS) was formed in 1961 (the same year of the merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists) because of differences with the Missouri Synod (LCMS) over three issues: the LCMS allows ecumenical fellowship (worship, including sacraments, and weddings) while the WELS does not; the LCMS recognizes ministry beyond the church pastor – teachers, chaplains and professors – while the WELS considers parish pastors to be the only office given in scripture; and the role of women: the LCMS does not allow women to take leadership roles over men (ordination, most especially) but it does give women the right to vote in church matters; the WELS permits neither women in authority over men nor a vote in decisions.

But the LCMS and WELS share a number of theological tenets:

- The Bible is the inerrant Word of God
- Belief in the Immaculate Conception
- Original sin
- God is present in the communion elements
- God is omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful) and omnipresent (all places)

- Opposition to governmental “liberalism” on many social issues (abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia) yet consider the church-state division biblical and a buffer from state control
- At death, the soul enters either heaven or hell
- Divorce is justified only in the case of adultery
- Premarital sex is considered sinful

If you’re looking for some theology that’s closer to our own, it would be that of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). While many of the issues above are listed on the ELCA website, it doesn’t take long to realize that that branch of the Lutheran tree is considerably more tolerant of two answers to one question.

The stamp of Luther’s theology on the ELCA is easily recognized: belief in the Trinity; appeals to God’s grace as the means of salvation; and the use of historic creeds, the Augsburg Confession and other of Luther’s writings. But notice the difference between the positions I read above and those that characterize the ELCA’s. In that denomination, the same language becomes more elastic.

Witness this handful of topics and brief notations:

- Scripture is the inspired, but human, Word of God
- The Holy Spirit is the gift of God’s presence in the world
- Other denominations and faiths contain truth and paths to God
- The Bible contains many examples of women in leadership roles, thus women are the equal of men in all facets of ministry
- Truth and wisdom may be found in non-biblical sources
- Prayer is communication with God in the context of the divine-human relationship
- Sin is our choice to be alienated from that relationship
- Baptism is a sacramental welcome to Christ’s family
- The Devil may be viewed literally or metaphorically

- Communion is the means by which Christians experience the living Christ amidst loving community

Quite a contrast, the ELCA, from its cousins from Missouri and Wisconsin!

The differences between these three expressions of the Lutheran faith are stark, but, as I suggested in my treatment of the Catholic Church, practiced religion can look very different from that religion's official statements. I hope these sweeping, outsider summaries add a little to your understanding of each.

A few words for those who might hear some of these religious or social positions and recoil at the thought of rubbing elbows with those who hold to them: how can we justify asking other religious folk to hear us with open minds and warm hearts if we can't be bothered to know some specifics about their faith? Forgive me if that sounds too preachy, but I think it's a fair question. Unitarian Universalism and Lutheranism – especially in these parts – share more than Scandinavian heritage and Protestant beginnings. There are the obvious similarities in worship. We know many of the same inspirational stories. We mark many of the same holy days, sing some similar music and, God knows, we like a potluck as much as any rock-ribbed child of Luther that ever walked the earth.

Some of the same beliefs within modern Lutheranism were central to liberal Christians on both our Universalist and Unitarian sides, and remain central to those of us who identify as UU Christians. Some of the beliefs we've discussed here still engage us – negatively or positively – challenging us to go deeper in search of our own truth and commitments. And let's be honest enough to admit that some of the beliefs we've covered here are big-time head-scratchers given what we know about the origins of the Bible and the insights of science and reason. Some even have the familiar ring of fear or bigotry or ignorance, so please don't think I'm about to send you out with some pious words about why can't we all just get along. But...but...

But what about the underlying humanity expressed in even the most distasteful of those beliefs? Is there anything there that hints at the hope for recognizing the inherent worth of that true believer? I mean, we, too, struggle to understand. We, too, try to come to terms with evil. We try, as best we know how, to account for the sneaking suspicion that something sacred resides within and between us. We, too, wonder about death. We, too, seek connection and community. We, too, want a place where our most cherished ideals are celebrated. We, too, want our children to become relatively sane, happy, law-abiding citizens. And we, too, want to experience a greater measure of the bizarre, elusive, wonder-filled, humbling, horrifying presence of this thing we call love. Oh, yes, we do. Heady as we are at times – experts at rationalization that we might be – we’re as broken and as vulnerable to life as the folks who cling to the Bible with a death grip or think this is their world and everybody else just lives in it.

My point? Our disagreements with people who want to put their faith in another century are blatantly obvious, positively maddening and, likely as not, beyond compromise. That said, let’s wind up by asking ourselves one more question: Do human beings share a common bond or not? For real?

If the answer is that we don’t, then we need not entertain the nagging possibility that our task is to grow a soul so big as to love our neighbors. Case closed. But if the answer is yes – if we affirm that our way of religion calls us to believe that even the obstinate and the bigoted and the hateful carry within them at least a single spark of divinity – then, man, do you and I live in a prime location to test that yes answer! Every day.

Two young lovers decided to book a salt water fishing trip to celebrate their first anniversary together. They were delayed in traffic, making them over an hour late in picking up the fancy boat they had reserved online.

When they arrived at the docks to stow their gear and take care of the paper work, they were stunned to learn that their boat had been reserved for 30 minutes past the pick-up time; it was the rental company's policy to rent the latecomers' boat to another customer if the original renters were more than 30 minutes late and all other boats were in use.

After watching the young couple begin bickering over whose fault it was that they were late, the fellow behind the counter waited for a lull in the action, then said, "Look, I'm sorry that things turned out the way they did. I've got an older boat that I'm restoring, but she's watertight. If you want, I'll let you have it for half the price of the other boat."

Still seething about the turn of events, the couple decided that, since they came all that way, they might as well take the one available boat. They threw their gear in the boat without speaking to each other. He started the motor; she sat in the bow, neither of them anywhere near ready to make up.

They were a good nautical mile out of port when a leak sprang and water began flooding the stern, leaving the motor just a minute or two from drowning out. Grabbing his coffee cup in order to begin bailing water as fast and as furiously as he could, the man turned to his sweetheart only to find her putting up her feet and relaxing!

"Why aren't you helping me?" he screamed. Smiling the smile of the proverbial Cheshire cat, the love of his life slowly said, "Why should I worry? The hole's on *your* side of the boat!"

There's a sermon somewhere in there, something about sharing a bond with somebody whether we like it or not.