



October 27, 2019

Sermon Series: **our** church. **our future.**

God Inspires Us to be the Church in this Generation and the Next  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

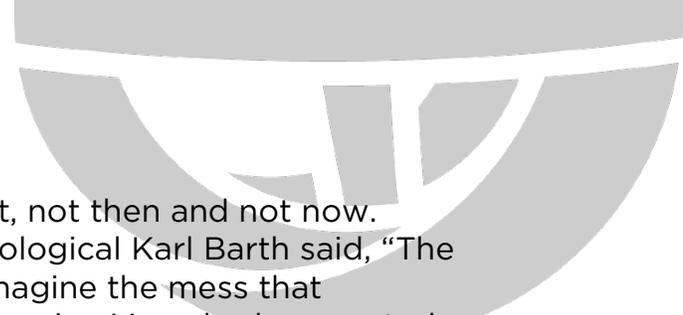
**Hebrews 12:1-3 NRSV**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>3</sup>Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

We're celebrating Reformation Sunday today. We remember Martin Luther and his bold act in nailing his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The year was 1517 and the Roman Catholic Church, of which Luther was a part, was badly in need of reform. So thought Luther. And he wanted to get it out in the open.

Luther stirred up all sorts of trouble among the powers that be. "A wild boar in the vineyard," that's what they called him. Among the reforms Luther proposed were: 1) reducing the number of sacraments from seven to two - communion and baptism being the two; 2) making private confession before a priest optional - beneficial, yes, but not a requirement; and 3) here's a big one: allowing priests to get married. In Luther's folksy wisdom, the clergy should be permitted to marry because - well - they needed housekeepers, and to place a man and woman together under such circumstances was like setting straw beside fire and expecting it not to burn. Needless to say, Luther's 95 theses ignited a fire of their own, and so began the Reformation.



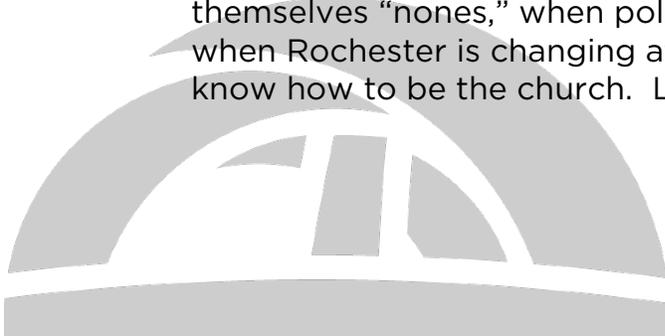
Reform in the church is not for the faint of heart, not then and not now. Shortly after the end of World War II, Swiss theologian Karl Barth said, "The church must always be reformed." I can only imagine the mess that churches in Europe, and especially Germany, were in. Many had supported Hitler. Now what? They needed to repent and ask for God's help in finding the way forward.

Today is Commitment Sunday at Zumbro. We picked this Sunday because it's a festive day, but also because we stand at a crossroads. We're asking the question: What sort of church will we be going forward? If we're honest, we probably need reform just as much as the church did in Luther's day. The issues have changed, but the need hasn't. Today is an opportunity to turn our hearts back to God, and to pray for God's guidance as we strive to be faithful in the future. We know something of what waywardness in the church can look like: when we get too caught up in the world's values, too inwardly focused, too comfortable with the status quo. When we do, God might come along and ask us to change our ways. Why? Not just change for change sake, but for the sake of reaching the world - building bridges, showing compassion, and reaching out with the hope of Jesus.

Zumbro is 154 years old. We're in our third location in downtown Rochester: the Little White Church on the corner; the brown brick church at Fourth Avenue and Fourth Street; and the new church next to Soldiers Field. If Karl Barth is right, we've been in need of reform all throughout our 154 years. Sometimes that reform has meant substantive change: moving from Norwegian to English in our worship services, changing our name from Rochester Evangelical Lutheran Congregation to Zumbro Lutheran Church, giving women the right to vote, allowing women to serve as pastors, becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation, and a whole host of other things. And, since there's no change without conflict, we've had more than a few differences to iron out along the way.

The church must always be reformed. What does that mean for us - now? Hindsight is easier than foresight. We may not be dealing with anything as monumental as the move to two sacraments, but God has something in mind for us. We're just not exactly sure what it is. *We walk by faith, not by sight.*

The uncertainty can be unsettling. In a day and age when fewer people in our country are calling themselves Christian and more are calling themselves "nones," when political divisions are getting sharper and deeper, when Rochester is changing at break-neck speed, it's getting harder to know how to be the church. Lord, we may need to be reformed, but could





you give us a little more direction along the way, because we really do want to be the church in this generation...and the next?

I spent some time with the quilters a couple of weeks ago. They've been getting ready to display their quilts at worship in early November. Afterward they will box them up and send them off to Lutheran World Relief. I found myself wondering, a bit wistfully: Will we still be making quilts 10 years from now? I hope so, but we don't know. *We walk by faith, not by sight.*

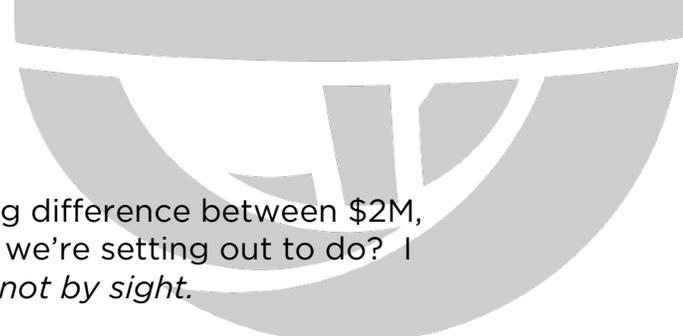
I spent some time with the lefse makers this past week. Let me tell you, there was a spirited conversation about the quality of the Rushford, machine-made lefse, and the hand-rolled delicacies we were producing. Over 2000 pieces of lefse were created. I found myself wondering, again wistfully: Will we still be making lefse - and holding the Bazaar - 10 years from now. I hope so, but we don't know. *We walk by faith, not by sight.*

Over the last few years, we've been taking a closer look at our location in downtown Rochester. Some have wondered if we should stay...or go. In the midst of our wondering, it feels as if the mission field has been moving in our direction: high rise apartments, UMR, Luther College. This mission field is causing us to rethink who we're trying to reach and what we're trying to do.

In our preaching over the last 6 weeks, we've been raising the awareness of how our facility serves as a platform for ministry and mission, and how it can help us be the church this generation and the next: Pastor Lisa said that God is building a church in the heart of the city, and promising to give us a future with hope. I talked about accessibility, a new elevator to get people to various levels, a raised chancel to help us see better, and a hearing loop to help us hear better. Pastor Shelley got us all excited with talk of infrastructure - about the need for a new roof; an updated HVAC system; a refurbished organ to fix the squeaks and pops that have nothing to do with Kristy Giere and her playing; and please, God, could you stop the flood rushing down into the quilt room. Pastor Ason painted a picture of the River of Life that will flow down from the cross, through the aisle, and out to the new baptismal font - part of **enhancing worship**. I talked about the importance of welcoming people and **extending hospitality** by taking down some of our walls and opening up our gathering spaces. And last but not least, today we're talking about **expanding our mission**.



This is an ambitious project - there's no doubt about it. Lots of careful listening has gone into it, and lots of prayer. Building renovation projects are hard work, and full of unanswered questions. People of Zumbro, that's



where your commitment comes in. There's a big difference between \$2M, \$2.5M and \$3.0M. Can we do all these things we're setting out to do? I hope so, but we don't know. *We walk by faith, not by sight.*

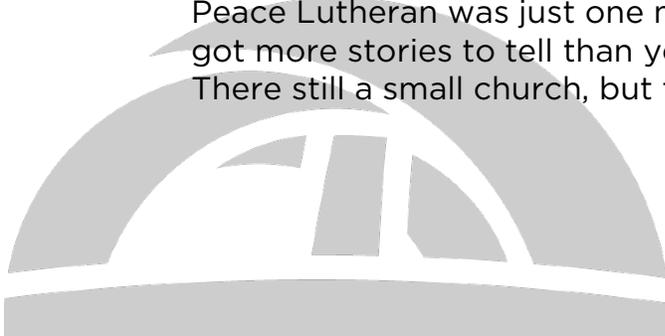
I love Hebrews 11 and 12. In chapter 11 we get a roll call of heroes of the faith. People like Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, Daniel, David. These were ordinary people – people like you and me – that God used in some extraordinary ways. Faith was the key. “Through faith,” Hebrews says, “they passed through the Red Sea as if they were on dry ground. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down. By faith they worked for justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of the lions, quenched raging fires, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness.”

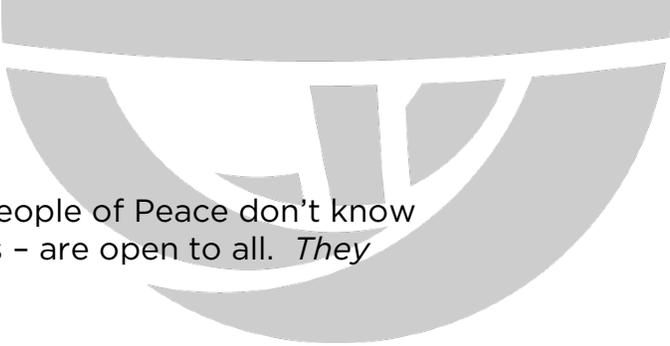
Hebrews adds a word of encouragement: “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Did any of these heroes know what was coming next? No. *They walked by faith, not by sight.* But here's the key: they looked to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of their faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.” And isn't that what we need to do too – to look to Jesus and his cross?

Over the years I've gotten together with Pastor Merv Thompson for breakfast. Merv was the pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran in Burnsville and then he headed to Hope in West Des Moines. Merv had a saying that has always stuck with me: “Vern, your church is just one new idea away from transformation.” I've always liked the sound of that. We can use a little transformation. The church is always in need of reform.

Peace Lutheran Church in Lauderdale, which is in the Twin Cities, was in need of reform. They had a lousy location and an even worse reputation. They were down to 20 members. They called a new pastor, Dave Greenlund, to see what he could do. At the first service, Pastor Dave stood up and said, “Okay, you're dead. Now what are you doing to do?” Quite the first impression. Not long afterward, someone got an idea: they would distribute flyers to their neighbors – 700 of them. They would offer to fix plumbing, start cars, remodel kitchens, fix leaky roofs – doesn't that sound fun? And their services would be free of charge.

This “new idea” started slowly. Neighbors were suspicious of anything religious. But there was no preaching, no expectations that people would come to worship. The church would simply help them. As it turns out, Peace Lutheran was just one new idea away from transformation. They've got more stories to tell than you can imagine. They're up to 80 members. There still a small church, but they have a big heart. Their motto is, “If the





neighborhood needs us, we'll stay open." The people of Peace don't know what's coming next, but their doors – and hearts – are open to all. *They walk by faith, not by sight.*

The church must always be reformed. As part of our capital campaign, we added a mission component. Very few churches do this. So why did we? Because, quite frankly, we didn't want people to think this renovation was all about us. No, we're **expanding our mission.**

Here's the plan: 1) We've added another night for Open Table. This past week we served 430 burritos. And because one of the nights is Wednesday, now confirmation kids and their families are serving too; 2) We're having conversations with Lutheran Social Services about the possibility of a drop-in center for youth at risk of homelessness. The need is real. We'll have to renovate some space in the lowest level to make room. We'll need a washer and dryer, and some mentors too; and finally, 3) We're helping Iambi Hospital in Tanzania plant corn. They already own the land. If they can raise a crop, and make some money in the process, then more of their staff can get paid. Our mission is expanding. Do we always know what we're doing? No. We plan, and we pray, and we trust God to lead the way. *We walk by faith, not by sight.*

In the meantime, we will continue to be the church, always in need of reform. We sew quilts for Lutheran World Relief, and make lefse for the Bazaar, and knit prayer shawls, and assist people in getting to worship at Samaritan Bethany, and help with projects at Good Earth Village, and send teams to the Rocky Boy Reservation, and connect with the Dinkas, our "downstairs church," and on and on and on.

This sounds exciting, doesn't it? God is calling us to be the church in this generation and the next. And God surrounds us with a great cloud of witnesses to help make it so. Do we always know where we're going? No. *We walk by faith, not by sight.* But we do know *why* we're doing it: to build bridges of understanding and peace, to reach out with compassion, and to share the hope of Jesus. Thanks be to God!

