



THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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OUR LIFE OF FAITH IS LIKE A CIRCLE – NOT A LINE

In most parts of life, we like to get people on a path – a line towards an end goal of success. For example, we send off our children to school at a young age, hoping that the few full years we have had with them and what we have taught them will show through as they start their education. Then we encourage them to do the best they can, and as they mature and decide what career path they wish to pursue, we help to guide them. The point is that we live in a *linear world*. People start with training wheels, the wheels come off, and then we are pushed out into an open parking lot where we are supposed to peddle and ride to the moon.

This linear way of thinking makes sense, though. Surely, we keep moving forward and strive to do the best we can to make life enjoyable and worthwhile. We want to lead successful and happy lives. No one wants to think of himself as being a failure. We learn from previous mistakes and do all we can to avoid making the same mistake. We set goals and hope to make them.

This same mindset can be found in the church too. We bring our children to baptism, they attend Sunday School, and then they are confirmed. Unfortunately, though, for many youths, it is believed that once they have reached Confirmation, they are at the end of the linear line – they have graduated the church. As a result, they never return to the church until they want to get married or need to have a pastor do a baptism or funeral for them. And parents of the confirmation kids feel fulfilled because they got their kids through the church's manufacturing line to the so-called end.

Now, I am not quite sure why we are so wired like this. We think linear – a line with a beginning, middle, and end. And we are not content with the idea of starting something over. We like to progress on a line – upward and onward, as they say! To do something over again, or to return to the beginning, is seen as a waste of time. It is seen as boring. We don't like repetition, and we don't like doing something twice. We like "new." We like movement on the line. We like progress.

While I certainly do not want to totally discredit this linear way of thinking because it is very valuable in many situations, I do believe that this linear way of thinking is very problematic for the church. I am not only talking about the problem of confirmation students getting confirmed and leaving, but I am talking about *how we understand our lives as Christians*. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear about ten lepers (17:11-19). Jesus healed them all, but only one returned to Him. And the other nine? Jesus was disappointed that they did not return to Him after they were healed. He asked, "*Were not ten cleansed? Where are*

the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (v. 17-18). The point being, this Christian faith is best thought of - not as a linear line - but as a circle - a circle where we are always returning to Jesus.

Think about it. The Samaritan leper was healed. Now, one could think that after being healed, he would've been good to go. He could've gone off to show himself to the priests and went on with his life with health and strength. But no! This healed leper returned to Jesus. Yes, he returned, and this returning to Jesus was good, not bad.

And so, like that Samaritan leper, the whole Christian life can be considered as a life of constantly returning to Jesus. It is a life of *continually being brought back to our baptisms*. It is a life of always beginning again. It is not, though, about getting a little Jesus and then moving on to higher and bigger spiritual accomplishments. In the Christian faith, the movement is not from being dependent upon God to being independent with yourself. As we mature in the Christian faith, we do not proceed from childhood to adulthood. No! That is the exact opposite of what it means to be a Christian. Again, this Christian faith is not a linear line but a circle.

It may be strange to think circularly, but we live circular every single day. For example, we wake up in the morning, brush our teeth, go about our business, come home, eat, get our pyjamas on, and go to sleep. And the next day? We do it all over again. And the day after that? We do it all over again. Our days are circular: morning, afternoon, evening, and night - morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Our weeks are also circular. We repeat our weeks over and over and over. And let's not forget our seasons: Autumn, Winter, Summer, and Spring are circular. We repeat them over and over again. And the church? It is circular. Think of the church calendar: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Trinity. Over and over again. And to be a little more precise, our Christian faith is circular as well. Daily we repent of our sins, and daily we are returned to the reality of our baptisms.

We must never forget that this Christian faith centres upon Jesus, returns to Jesus, and rests upon - Jesus. That is why Jesus calls us to abide, rest, watch, listen, receive, stay, and trust.

The problem is though that we are prone to wander. We are prone to leave the God that loves us. We are like sheep who wander to other pastures. We are like coins that seem to get lost in deep cracks. We are like unruly children who rebel and go to the big city to party. We find a linear line pointing away from Jesus and we jump on the line. Our problem is that our sinful nature loves to find lines that lead away from Jesus – to get us out of the circle of returning to Jesus. And to make things worse, our old Adam is quite tricky. Yes, we are often deceived into getting on a line and

thinking that Jesus is behind us, encouraging us upward and onward to great spiritual things when in reality, it is the devil cheering us on as we leave Jesus behind in our dust.

The Christian faith is not you and me following some line to get to some carrot on the end of the stick. We are not on a journey to get a treasure at the end of a rainbow. The problem is not that we haven't arrived at the end of the line; the problem is that we can so easily believe that God wants us on some sort of line when in reality, the calling is for us to stay put – to return to Christ and His gifts every single week, day, and moment.

We do not live apart from Christ. That is not how things work. We do not live independently from His gifts. Just as we need air to breathe, water to live, and food to give energy, we must always return to Christ for forgiveness, life, and salvation. This Christian life is circular because we are always returning to the fountainhead of grace and truth. We do not return just once at the beginning or the end, but we return constantly.

And so, it is all about returning to Christ, just like that healed Samaritan leper.

How do we return? We return just like that healed Samaritan leper. We return with reverence, with our face in the dirt, not only thanking the Lord but crying for more mercy. We return to Jesus like little children to receive our full royal inheritance – not as a strong and invisible adult – but as a begging son and daughter of God.

And the Lord God? He does not despise our returning to Him. We are not nuisances! We are not a bother. He longs to hear our confessions. He has joy in giving us forgiveness. He desires to give Himself to us and to bless us, not just at the beginning or the end but constantly.

Our journey in the Christian faith is a constant returning to the prize that has *already been given to us* in Christ and His gifts. Therefore, we return to the Lord and His house where His gifts are delivered, as sheer gifts.

THE REFORMATION

October is the month in we celebrate "Reformation Day." This year Reformation Day, the 31st of October, falls on a Sunday. People like to take the time on Reformation Day to remember the work of the great reformer himself, Martin Luther. After all, what could be more 'reformation' than the Great Reformer?

Luther wouldn't appreciate it if he heard that. He did not consider himself to be a reformer. He was a student and a teacher and a spokesman for the Gospel, but he did not consider himself a reformer. He considered himself to be a herald of what was right and good. For Martin Luther, Jesus Christ is the Great Reformer.

Martin didn't picture himself as a reformer or a church leader. He thought of Himself as a teacher. He wasn't THE Teacher, that was Christ, too. Later in his life, Martin Luther

understood what had happened around him. He knew why people called him a reformer. But he always maintained that he was a tool in God's hand and that any reforming that got done was accomplished by Christ through His holy Word.

Jesus is the Great Reformer. We confess as much in the Catechism, in the meaning to the third article of the Apostles' Creed. Not only does He call us by the Gospel, through the Holy Spirit, and give us faith by enlightening us with His gifts, but He keeps us in the one true faith. He does it all by the Holy Spirit at work through the Word.

Whenever the Church needs to be reformed, Christ sends His preachers to proclaim the truth. What they say may not be welcome at all times by all parties, but His Word is the power through which God will accomplish change. It is the 'toolbox' of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus works through that Word whatever it is that He intends to work – *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways," declares the LORD.*⁹ *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts."*¹⁰ *For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not go back there without watering the earth and causing it to bring forth and to sprout, so that it **gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater,***¹¹ *so My Word will be, which goes out of My mouth. It will not return to Me without results but will accomplish what I desire and be successful in what I have sent it to do,"* (Is. 55:8-11).

That is not to say that everything that happens in the Church is what the Lord wills or that it happens the way the Lord wants it done. Everything He does is what He wants done, and done the way He wants it done. People often have their own agendas, which are not always good or holy. But God knows everything that happens, and He is able to use it, even the really bad stuff, for His own purposes. What the Word of God accomplishes, however, is always the work of God.

Sometimes God works judgment on those that despise His Word and reject Him and His Gospel. In those cases, the Holy Word of God drives them to do horrible things. They cannot tolerate hearing it, so they attack, they run away, or they find methods for subverting the message and changing the teaching of the Church. Every denomination bears the marks of such subversive work in controversies, false doctrines either embraced or permitted in their midst, and unfaithful practices which arise in a church. These "plagues" upon the churches are one of the ways that God challenges His people to be faithful, while at the same time bringing greater condemnation on those who passively endure or openly embrace and advocate for teachings and practices that ought not to be tolerated among the people of God.

When the situation seems out of control and hopeless, then Jesus Christ will raise up a champion - a messenger of His to wield the sword of the Lord - in order to "reform" His church. Such men in our history include Luther, and Martin Chemnitz, and C.F.W. Walther. These men were not reformers, however, they were the servants of Christ, used as tools in the great work of His of cleansing and strengthening His Church. We know their names because of their stature among their contemporaries, but these men were no more significant, or powerful, than the thousands of faithful pastors and laymen that stood shoulder to shoulder with them, steadfastly clinging to the Word and 'holding up the prophet's hand', as it were.

The reformation under Christ is a reformation which takes place first in the hearts of men (by which I mean to refer to both males and females). He literally 're-forms' us. He starts by proclaiming His Word to us and works from the inside out. First, He crushes us. He hammers us with the Law, convincing us of our sins and our inability to be good enough to merit anything but wrath from God. Then He forgives us when we have been humbled and repent. And with that forgiveness Jesus re-builds us - we even call it "conversion" - a change from one thing into something else. We are reformed. That is the meaning of passages like Hosea 6:1, "*Come! Let us return to the LORD! For, although He has torn us apart, He will heal us. Although He strikes us down, He will bandage our wounds.*"

This reformation is not a one-time thing but is on-going daily. We need it as often as we sin. It is ours as often as we hear the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, and find ourselves turning again for forgiveness and comfort to Christ. We should do so daily, and when we do, we can use our baptism - drowning the old man in the waters of our baptism, in which we were claimed by Christ, and allowing God to raise up each day, through contrition and repentance and the knowledge of forgiveness, that new man who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

The reformation that we celebrate at the end of October is the restoration of the Gospel to public proclamation and to the daily life of the Church in its teaching and practice. The Gospel was not unknown at the time of Luther- it was simply not proclaimed or practiced publicly. The Holy Spirit never permitted faith in Christ to vanish from the Church, it simply did not hold centre stage. It was, to take the theatre analogy a little farther, tucked away in a prop closet somewhere. There were those who knew it by the Word, and the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word, but it was not generally known or deliberately proclaimed by very many.

Jesus used Luther to push the Gospel back into the centre. First, Christ prepared Luther by the Law. You never heard of such a terrified monk as brother Martin. He prayed

for hours. He whipped himself with various scourges until he bled, even passed out. He tried desperately to atone for his sins and come to the certainty that he was square with God and saved. He slept naked on cold stone floors in the middle of winter. He fasted until he could hardly stand. All these tortures because he knew he was unfit to come before God, and he had been taught, along with all of his fellow Catholics in those days, that such self-torment would reduce our guilt before God, and please Him, and induce God to forgive us.

It never worked, and Christ never allowed Luther to deceive himself into thinking that it did. Consequently, Luther hated God. He hated God boldly and fiercely for giving him such a hopeless life and task. Only when Jesus opened his eyes - enlightening Luther by the power of the Holy Spirit - did Luther understand that God never expected man to be able to achieve holy perfection by works or torments. God dealt with sin by sending His Son. Jesus did perfection, and then died for sin. Because He became sin who knew no sin of His own, God freely forgives them that take Him at His Word and promise and trust Him to do for us and give to us all that we need for life and peace. It was by grace through faith, the righteousness of God from faith to faith.

Once Luther was brought to understand that the righteousness God required of us was only possible by God's gift, and that God loved him so much that He was providing that gift through Christ, Luther found his peace and comfort. It was, as Luther wrote later, as if the gates of heaven had been thrown open before him. It is the same experience for any Christians today, when they find the Gospel opened to them, and understand at last why God set the Law before them. For such people, the rejection of the Gospel and of sound doctrine and practice by so many makes no sense at all.

The reformer is not Luther. Luther created nothing - he just wrote about it and preached about it and made the work of Jesus Christ that much more public. The Great Reformer is Jesus, who calls the Church into being, and shapes it according to His will by His great grace. Happy Reformation Day.

SHALL WE KNOW EACH OTHER IN HEAVEN?

A question I was asked recently was, "*Shall I know everyone in heaven?*" This is a tough question to answer because the Bible doesn't tell us everything we want to know about heaven. However, from the descriptions of heaven we do have in the Bible, it does seem that we shall recognise each other.

But how much shall we remember of our lives and relationships here on earth? That's hard to say. The Bible does say that in heaven there will be no memory of the pains and problems of this world. Isaiah 65:16 says, "...the

former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes.” But what exactly we shall remember is a question we can’t answer this side of heaven.

What we do know is that in heaven everything will be perfect. In heaven, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”* (Revelation 21:4). In heaven, we shall no longer sin. In heaven, all our relationships will be healed. In heaven, there will be no more arguments or resentment or disappointment.

In heaven, we shall hug those with whom we struggle here on earth, those who annoy us and even those who don’t want to be in the same room as us right now. When we walk into heaven, everybody will know our names and they will always be glad we came. We can be sure we have a home where everybody knows our name.

Why? *Because we have a God who knows our names.* He knew our individual names even before our parents chose it. He loved us before time even began.

In fact, He has loved us so much that He has become one of us to suffer the punishment we deserve for all the pain we’ve caused, all the relationships we’ve damaged and all the anger we’ve shown. Jesus has come into a world which rejected Him, where He stood in a courtroom surrounded by people who hated Him. He was led to a courtyard full of soldiers who whipped Him and mocked Him. He hung from a cross as people walked by shaking their heads in disgust and hurling insults. On that cross, Jesus faced His Father’s anger for our failures.

Jesus suffered that rejection so we never would have to. Because He did, we are forgiven. Through faith in Him, we have a home waiting for us where everybody knows our name.

So when you walk into a room full of angry faces here on earth, when you face the heartache of broken relationships, when you feel alone and unloved, remember that one day you will walk through the door of a massive banquet hall. Everyone will stop what they are doing. Every eye will turn to you, and with welcoming smiles, they will all call out your name.

FROM THE PASTOR

I don’t have much to report for now, but it is going to be extra busy for the rest of the year with lot’s happening. We are quickly coming to an end of the Church Year. Soon we shall celebrate the Reformation, then All Saints Day, and soon after that we enter the Season of Advent. We are still to hold our Harvest Thanksgiving services. These will be held within the coming months, so keep an eye out in your bulletins.

By now, I am sure you have all heard of a church and hall being purchased in Toowoomba in Buckland Street, Harristown. The church and hall used to belong to the St Mary’s Anglican Church. Praise God for the generous loan given through Chapter One Lutherans to secure the premises! Troys Road will be sold to help repay this loan. Some tidying up and maintenance work will need to be performed over the coming weeks, before the congregation of Bethlehem Toowoomba hopes to begin using the buildings shortly. We intend to hold an AELC re-dedication service in the near future, so again, keep your eyes on the bulletins for a date. Below is a photo of the church and hall:



LATEST AELC WEBSITE STATISTICS

The following are the latest figures from the AELC website:
Number of average daily visitors: currently 3186, up from 2100 in May. (This number has increased dramatically since the new website went live)