

**A sermon on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.
Lake Park Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, WI
Oct. 29th, 2017
The Rev. David Dragseth**

This summer I had the joy of being in Wittenberg Germany for a conference. Jennifer and I were in a cocktail reception of scholars and one joined our group and asked a provocative question.

“I really wonder what all of this scholarship and research means if only 7 or 8% of those living around Wittenberg actually go to church anyways. The world is changing, what are we doing?”

It was as if the questioner was channeling Luther’s pastoral heart.

It was the same 500 years ago. Everything in the church had changed, everything in society had changed, new economies were coming in, nation states were growing up, technology was taking off. The power of the church was trying to hold on to everything through an increasingly rigid structure and confinement.

In the midst of it all, Luther, the pastor, was concerned the Word of God would be lost. And so not looking back to try to justify the church of old, Luther looked forward. If everything had changed so much, we as modern church (500 years ago) needed to talk about it. And so he posted 95 questions that he thought the new church needed to ponder.

I’m not going to do 95 today, modern attention span and all. But, I am going to do 9.5 questions that the new church going forward for the next 500 years needs to ponder. Here it is, and I’ll begin it like Martin began it, a little tweaked. . .

Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend David Dragseth, Master of Divinity, and haggard pastor at Lake Park Lutheran Church in Milwaukee intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them this morning. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter or email or text or Instagram or Twitter or Facebook or whatever new communication technology comes along. . . In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Thesis #1 When Jesus defended the faith of those who had other faiths and when Jesus commended the faith of other religions in scripture he intended that all religious practice forever forward would be interfaith. The bible is Interfaith. Naomi learns from Ruth. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman. Biblical heroes thrive in the mix of religions. And so any church for the next 500 years will have to be interfaith as well. Not that we all practice the same or worship the same or even all worship together, but that we worship in constant dialogue and friendship and mutual challenge with one another. We as many faiths check and balance one another in the grand marketplace of God. And so we rejoice as Lake Park today that there is a thriving

Islamic community growing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And we rejoice that our friends who are leaders of that community, Imam Ziad Hamdan and Dr. Kamil, have joined us for worship today, just as we have joined them for worship in the past.

Thesis #2 When Christ our Lord said that in him there is no male nor female and when he called women and intersex people to follow him in leadership he was setting a new understanding of religious practice that was gender inclusive. Gender would no longer be used to divide. Gender divides and has divided Christianity for millennia and it is the basis of most of our historic division. The new church when it truly understands gender will heal a multitude of divisions. Gender exclusivity is not a part of the story of God going forward.

Thesis #3 When Christ our Lord said all the cosmos would be saved, he meant all, not simply human beings. We can finally put to rest the age old question; do dogs go to heaven? Yes, they do. Even cats. St. Francis was not crazy preaching to the animals. They are recipients of the word of God. But more interesting, if Christ is in all creation then God, in Christ speaks through creation, so the animals preach back. The animals teach us God's proclamation. This has profound ramifications for science. It did 500 years ago when Luther preached and it opened up a new scientific revolution and it will today as well. A scientist is a kind of priest researching and discovering God's word in the earth itself. When a scientist discovers things that seem in contrast to our religion, we must listen. This meant something to the Copernican Revolution 500 years ago and it means something to our debate over climate change today. In addition, when our Ojibwa friends remind us that Lake Michigan is speaking to us and can heal us, we must listen. This fits our understanding of the redemption that comes through creation.

Thesis #4 When God almighty was born as a human child, God intended that bodies should be the means of salvation. Incarnation. Who knows what kind of digital, cyber, virtual, robotic world we will invent in the future. But there will be need in that world to remember bodies in the midst of it all. We will need communities that wrestle with the questions; What makes us human? This is the ethical question of our coming age. The church, a gathering in fleshy assembly, talking to one another, holding one another, having real meetings that we really walk to and really sit in a room together with one another will be revolutionary in the new church. And this thing, meeting together in body, will be a kind of revolutionary wisdom to coming generations.

I was astounded at one of our recent high school retreats how overwhelmed the kids were with the simple task of setting a table for dinner. A couple kids were like "Where do I put the fork?" "Over here." "Where do I put the knife?" "Over here." "Where do I put the plate?" "Where does the food go?" An entire afternoon was spent teaching the ancient task of a family dinner. "Wow," exclaimed one at the end, "this is fun!" It is true. Most of us don't do this anymore. The very craft of balancing and attending to bodies that we take so fore-granted today will be precious wisdom

for the modern world. Bodies, what it means to be human, will be something that only the church advocates.

Thesis #5 When Christ demands that we confess our sins, he means it. Confession. The church of the next 500 years will confess it's sins. Walking in the gardens of Wittenberg the youth of the Lutheran World Federation posted this signboard; "500 years of Racism. 500 years of Reformation, is there a connection?" Scholars have dismantled the connection of Lutheran history and racism. Yes, there is a connection. Our modern understanding of race and racism developed side by side with the Reformation. Capitalism, free-markets, colonialism all fueled racism and our history was caught up in it. It may or may not have been Lutheran's intent, but it happened and the church of the future must deconstruct it and change it. If we are to be a church of the next 500 years we must follow those in our midst who've made this confession quite substantially. We can't go through Germany today without a deep confession of Lutherans who say; "we were wrong, we need to be better." Today, right now, this week, hundreds of papers throughout the country are reflecting on Luther's own words of Anti-Semitism, what they meant in that time and what they've meant historically through our time. We must confess this, learn from it, and be different for the sake of the world.

Thesis #6 When Jesus honors all vocations and when Lutherans for 500 years have said we are a priesthood of all believers, it has to bear fruit in society. The church of the future will attack our classism and the way we graft holiness to certain jobs and not to others. All jobs are holy. Every job has value. Every job deserves pay and dignity and a position. We as a church must confess this spiritual truth going forward and we must make it real in the marketplace, in our government, in our voting. All jobs deserve honor.

Thesis #7 When God declared in Revelation and in Matthew and in Acts that all nations would gather before God, God meant it. Being an American or a Finn or a Ghanaian or an Argentinian or an Indian is part of God's plan. Nations, history, ethnicity is a gift of God. But the church of the future will not be a place that places any one of nation first. A Christian potluck will be international, Lutefisk and kimche. . . imagine. This is so simple, but there are many churches that you cannot be a member if you don't eat Lutefisk. It is insane. It is insane. But it is still true today. That is why we are having international Oktoberfest downstairs in order to subvert this entire thing. But the reality is, we love being nations! Being nations is fun, having history is great. There are wonderful gifts in that, but holding it in such a way that we don't tyrannize our gifts over another or exclude one another is the issue. We are trying to do it in music today. The Stratocaster, the African drums, the baroque and the Bob Marley, we are trying to diversity our expression to celebrate our different traditions but not put one, in hubris, over another. One would pray we do the same with our politics.

Thesis #8 When the apostle Paul said power is made perfect in weakness he was not joking. Power will be understood differently in the new church. Power will be expressed in humility, in love, in self sacrifice, in giving of oneself to another. The

church must model this for the secular powers. The church must model the good stewarding of power, because the world on its own will mess it up.

Thesis #9 When the prophets and Jesus and the apostles said All are saved. they meant all. Foundationally this is perhaps the most radical. All are loved and saved by God. All. Every one. We, eternally, in salvation are bound to one another. We will never be rid of those whom we disagree with, those whom we fight with in this world. Everyone will be together. It is remarkable to me how many of my own Lutheran pastor friends are afraid to say that. All are loved and saved by God. That is the gift of grace.

And .5

Everything I just said. . . I have no idea if it will be the case.

We have no idea. We have no idea where we are going. Anyone who says they know is just kidding themselves. Think about how much the world has changed in the last 2 years, let alone the last 50 years, let alone the last 100 years. I mean 500 years! It is going to change exponentially more in the next 5 months. We have no idea. But there is something amazing in our confession of unknowing. Because all we have then, all we have then is the thin reality that everything we do in the future will absolutely have to be driven not by our own knowledge or intellect or plans, but ultimately by the loving grace of God who mysteriously holds us.

We need a savior. We do.

And God almighty in a mysterious number of ways has already condescended to be it. And God will continue to be it forever, and ever, and ever, to the end of the ages. Amen.