

Commemorating 1517 without dressing up as Luther with a hammer Gail Ramshaw

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I have been asked to discuss a topic before us all: how to observe the five hundredth anniversary of the events of 1517, the beginnings of the Western Christian Reformation. Let me organize my comments by delineating two quite different ways to understand what this occasion might be all about: Lutherans celebrating Luther, or Lutherans and Roman Catholics together commemorating our common Christian past, our shared present, and a future of hope.

Lutherans celebrating Luther

One interpretative proposal for 2017 that might overload cyberspace is that Lutherans are to use this time to celebrate the achievements of Martin Luther. I foresee a parish member dressed up as Luther carrying a hammer and joining the Sunday morning’s liturgical procession or the pastor dressed as a friar and waving his hammer in the pulpit. Let me urge caution about this plan. I fear that any such staging will embody exaggerated and inaccurate historical fragments and may serve to reinforce out-of-date prejudices.

Persons who are contemplating this option need to be made aware of the following: that much of what is popularly believed and taught about the events of 1517 is historically inaccurate; that Reformation historians are telling us that perhaps Luther only posted, that is, sent in the mail to his bishop, the Ninety-Five Theses, rather than affixing them to any church door; that if he did post them on a public bulletin board, he used wax, not nails; that during the early years of the Reformation, the Ninety-Five Theses were never translated into German for the general population to read; that the earliest artistic image of Luther with a hammer in his hand appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, a time of militant antagonism between Lutherans and Roman Catholics; that the Lutheran comic book I was given as a child, which showed the monastic library as having chained up the Bible to keep it from the people, totally misrepresented the intention of the medieval church to keep rare and valuable Bibles safely available to those who could read. Despite all this, I note with regret that materials being currently published for 2017 feature Luther and his hammer as cover art. (Am I the only one for whom “hammer” has negative connotations?) So please do not dress up as Luther with a hammer.

As you hope to educate your congregation about the Reformation, I am sorry to report that each of the several films based on the life of Luther is more or less inadequate or untrustworthy. For example, *Martin Luther, Heretic* (1983), available on YouTube, shows the people of Wittenberg avidly reading the Latin Ninety-Five Theses hot off the press, which they did not. Despite Luther’s decades of effort studying, translating, teaching, and preaching the Bible, the films include distressingly few scenes of Luther doing anything with the Scriptures.

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In the worship service portrayed in the 2003 film *Luther*, worshipers are sitting, men and women side by side, in pews with backs, as Luther wanders up and down the aisle while preaching in a casual tone of voice, a depiction totally inaccurate in every way. I am sorry that these opportunities to convey to contemporary audiences the essence of 1517 are flawed. It is not surprising, however, that each film does feature the hammer.

I judge that the most responsible depictions of Martin Luther show him wearing his doctoral robe as befitting his role as a university professor of biblical studies, and my favorite of all is the Playmobil figure in which a smiling Luther is holding out both the vernacular New Testament and his quill pen. Not a hammer, but the Bible.

To those Lutherans who think a reconstruction of Luther's proposals of orders of worship would be a good idea, my advice is that constructing worship as costume drama is never a good idea. We are to worship God as we are, in our time and place. Indeed, during the twentieth century, liturgical leaders in many of the world's churches labored to authorize and popularize patterns of worship that speak the current language, that honor our own cultural attitudes about gender, that celebrate the resurrection with contemporary music and art. Historical play-acting at worship makes heart-felt participation in the praise of God difficult, because in such performances we are always watching ourselves be someone other than we are. I recall an ecumenical Thanksgiving Day service at which the ushers dressed up as Puritans paced up and down the aisle carrying one of those ten-foot poles which four hundred years ago were used to bop parishioners on the head if they were snoozing during the two-hour sermons. But what we encountered in the 1950s was a parody of the past that did not render our Thanksgiving praise more profound. As well, Martin Luther was a no-nonsense person who would probably be disgusted to see himself impersonated in worship. He would ask: does this song-and-dance drive Christ? Like the traditional images of John the Baptist, who is always pointing to Christ, Luther points us to Christ, not to himself. And if you hope to repeat Luther's address at the Diet of Worms, please reflect on the fact that for countless Christians around the world today, especially the young ones, the words "Here I stand" will evoke not a line that perhaps Luther spoke in 1520 – or perhaps he did not, historians disagree about this – but rather the song of Elsa the Ice Queen in the film *Frozen*: "Here I stand / In the light of day / Let the storm rage on / The cold never bothered me anyway!"

To those who are considering using 2017 to celebrate Luther's accomplishments, I suggest the standard order for Holy Communion as presented in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), filled to the brim with Luther and Reformation-era hymns. The volume *The Sunday Assembly* (pages 59, 180-87) gives help here. For an opening confession and absolution, the assembly can sing "Out of the Depths I Cry to You" (ELW #600), Luther's hymn praying for forgiveness. The Kyrie will be "Kyrie! God, Father" (#409); the hymn of praise "All Glory Be to God on High" (#410); the creed will be Luther's version of the Nicene Creed, "We All Believe in One True God" (#411); the "Holy Holy Holy" will be Luther's Sanctus, "Isaiah, in a Vision Did of Old" (#868); a full eucharistic prayer and the Lord's Prayer will be followed by "Lamb of God, Pure and Sinless" (357). For the hymn of the day, you might choose #505, a reformed translation of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." For the eucharistic prayer – please remember that Luther's colleague Philipp Melancthon praised the eucharistic prayer of the Eastern Orthodox Church – you might select either the prayer from the third or fourth century designated in the

ELW as Form XI (ELW p. 69) or the prayer that the Lutheran scholar Luther Reed first published in 1947, designated as Form I. For the final blessing, Luther preferred the use of the Aaronic benediction (ELW p. 114).

Perhaps the most appropriate date on which to schedule such a service would be February 19, 2017, one day after the commemoration of Luther, which is set annually on his death-day, February 18. (His last words were not something about a hammer, but “We are beggars, this is true.”) A service such as the one here described is not historical play-acting. Rather, it employs the most recent Lutheran order of worship and the best vernacular translations of hymns, so that our worship is indeed of our time and place.

Better than plowing through the Ninety-Five Theses, a congregational study group may make more fruitful use of its time by reading through Luther’s “Sermon on Indulgences and Grace” (*The Annotated Luther*, Volume 1: *The Roots of Reform* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015], 60-65). This popular sermon of 1518, which was reprinted in German twenty-five times in two years, had far more effect on the general population than did the academically formulated Latin Theses. An annotated translation of this vernacular pamphlet will assist your people in understanding the medieval theological categories of Luther’s day. It was the printing of this sermon that made Luther a best-selling author. It is humbling to admit that when we commandeer people from the past to serve our contemporary purposes, we often seriously distort the persons they genuinely were. Indeed, the real Luther would shock, even distress, many of us. This sermon may surprise you with both what sounds familiar and what sounds quite alien to our ears.

Lutherans and Roman Catholics praying together

Let me now describe now my preferred option – that Lutherans use 2017 not primarily to celebrate Luther, but rather to commemorate, with Lutherans and Roman Catholics together, our common understanding of past, our collaboration in the present, and our hopes for the future. I hope we Lutherans can worship throughout 2017 as the time that it is: a time of international ecumenical conversation between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, a time of joint resolve to erase errors and to design collaborative projects. Recall that in 1999, the dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics released the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which stated that the differing denominational emphases did not invalidate the commonalities between the churches on this central theological issue. This Declaration is available as a PDF file on-line. It is a time to forgive each other for past offenses, to rejoice in our common baptism, and to walk together into God’s future.

I heard once about a high school in the United States in which students when studying the American Revolution used a textbook written and published in Britain. We can emulate this creative approach to our continuing education by reviewing the past with each other’s eyes. We can collaborate when recalling history, rather than repeating one-sided and ill-informed memories. We can stand with the countless homes in which one parent is Lutheran and one Roman Catholic, helping these ecumenical households be fervently Christian. We can be grateful that each church body has learned so much from the other. We Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are no longer worshiping like the villagers in *Babette’s Feast*, with one man in a black robe up there talking on and on, but we gladly don historic eucharistic

vestments for weekly communion, we sign up to serve as assisting ministers, our assemblies are enriched by the three-year lectionary that was developed in an ecumenical council largely by Roman Catholics. And we rejoice that across the street, Roman Catholics, with their renewed papacy, are faithfully proclaiming God's mercy in three readings each week, with their assembly singing hymns from the past and present, all the baptized knowing that the church is the whole people of God. Our ecclesial communities can stand side by side, enriched by each other's presence, strengthened by each other's voices.

The primary resource for such an understanding of 2017 is the booklet *From Conflict to Communion*, a report prepared for a Lutheran-Catholic common commemoration of 1517 (Report of the Lutheran—Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, Leipzig: Bonifatius, 2013). Both the booklet itself and a helpful study guide are available as on-line PDF files. Jointly prepared by Roman Catholic and Lutheran historians and theologians, this booklet summarizes several centuries of historical events that began in 1517 and that affect both our churches, as well as data describing the twenty-first-century situation of our churches in theology and practice. According to *From Conflict to Communion*, the three contemporary phenomena of ecumenism, globalization, and new evangelization have set us in a radically different place than was that of Luther and Pope Leo X, and this booklet helps us to reexamine our history and to contemplate our actual current situation. No matter how much or how little historical knowledge you and your people have, no matter how attentive or not you have been to the ecumenical dialogues of the last decades, this booklet will serve you well.

Standing side by side, we can continue to grapple with our theological differences, developing our relationship in new ways, even gently correcting our own and each other's memories. But such conversation is more productive when we can also pray side by side. Please watch your national church's website, www.elca500.org, to see forthcoming 2017 ecumenical worship service suggestions. One such service order is being jointly prepared by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation. There will also be a spin-off of the commemoration of the Reformation that will be held at the May 2017 Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Namibia. Thus some thoughtful worship suggestions will be available for your consideration.

Those of you who are eager to design your own worship service can be inspired by the three-fold content of the booklet *From Conflict to Communion*: (1) we celebrate the shared joy we have in the gospel; (2) we acknowledge the pain over failures and sins and our need for repentance; and (3) we pray for the ongoing challenge to bear common witness to Christ throughout the world. That is: joy, repentance, and common witness. Be sure to balance each Lutheran quote or hymn with one written by a Roman Catholic. If you sing "A Mighty Fortress," you might also appoint the splendid hymn written in 1983 by the Benedictine sister Delores Dufner, "The Word of God is Source and Seed" (ELW 506). "What Is This Place" (ELW 524) by the twentieth-century Roman Catholic Jesuit priest Huub Oosterhuis can be sung next to "Beloved, God's Chosen" (ELW 648) by Lutheran laywoman Susan Palo Cherwien. The ninth-century chant "Ubi Caritas et Amor," "Where True Charity and Love Abide" (ELW 642 or 653), would be a welcome addition, grounding our separate voices in their common past.

You might also pray the beloved seventeenth-century prayer for the church (ELW pages 58 and 73): "We pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is

right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.” I smile when I think that this splendid prayer for the church was written by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud, who when he was in political power saw to the imprisonment of Puritans and their expulsion from England and then, when tables were turned, was himself executed on the charge of popery. We thank God both that we are no longer in his situation of virulent opposition to other Christians, and that the breadth and depth of Laud’s words exceed the narrowness of his personal sense of church. Thus together we can join in his fine prayer.

Perhaps in your location a joint worship service can be co-sponsored by your Lutheran church and a local Roman Catholic parish. Perhaps the best scheduling for such an event would be Sunday afternoon, October 29, 2017. It might be difficult to schedule a service on Tuesday evening, October 31, given the American hoop-la of Halloween. A committee constituted by people from both denominations could work together on logistics. Perhaps the two parishes can schedule a joint session of Bible study of the texts appointed for the service. As well, the following Sunday will be celebrated in both churches as All Saints Sunday, year A. Thanks to the three-year ecumenical lectionary, the readings in both churches on that Sunday will be from Revelation 7, 1 John 3, and Matthew 5, for also at Sunday morning worship we Lutherans and Roman Catholics are praising God and praying for the world side by side. The ecumenical planning committee might continue to meet, discussing the texts for All Saints Sunday and then later for the upcoming Last Sunday of Year A, Christ the King, on which both churches will once again share common readings from Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25.

I admit that it might be easier to plan congregational events of Rah-rah-Luther than to collaborate with the Roman Catholics down the street to schedule ecumenical events, especially since many Lutherans may need to be informed about accurate history and the current interchurch situation. Yet using this anniversary to teach about the wider church might honor Luther in a most profound way. As the text of *From Conflict to Communion* states, “Because Lutherans believe that they belong to the one body of Christ, Lutherans emphasize that their church did not originate with the Reformation or come into existence only 500 years ago. Rather, they are convinced that the Lutheran churches have their origin in the Pentecost event and the proclamation of the apostles” (par. 222). And as the document says, “The beginning of the Reformation will be rightly remembered when Lutherans and Catholics hear together the gospel of Jesus Christ and allow themselves to be called anew into community with the Lord” (par. 245). We know that it is not the Lutheran church that saves, but Christ, and our conduct during 2017 gives us the occasion to tell everyone that two once oppositional communities are now standing side by side, praising God for their common baptism, offering their joint repentance, and committing themselves to an ecumenically informed mission.

God bless your commemoration of 1517.