

REFORMATION SUNDAY OCTOBER 26, 2025

Back around 1993 or so, I was both fascinated and horrified by a local pastor of a large Baptist church. Bob was on a campaign to change the name of First Baptist Church to Lake Street Church. He wasn't proposing that they leave the American Baptist denomination but that they take that denominational name out of their public-facing materials, including their church sign on Lake Street. The young pastor felt that the label "Baptist" sounded negative to a lot of people, a turn off. He wanted to reform their congregation into a place that welcomed everybody, no matter their spirituality or belief system. At one point, the local Rabbi said to me, "I think I'm more Christian than Bob is." But Bob eventually convinced the congregation to the name change, and the culture change. In many ways, Bob was trailblazing what would become a trend in many Christian congregations.

Denominational labels are many: Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist (now two kinds), Disciples of Christ, AME, AME Zion, the list goes on. These many monikers have been both a source of embarrassing division in the Christian family and simultaneously a source of loyalty and passion.

And so, on this one Sunday each year when we as Lutherans commemorate our historical beginnings, it's a time not for a history lesson, but a theology lesson. In an American culture of non-denominational churches and of other churches who are still official members of a denomination but have taken that adjective out

of their public-facing documents; we at Pilgrim continue to name ourselves out loud and in writing, Pilgrim Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That identity says a lot about who we are, how we function, what we believe, how we worship our Lord and serve our neighbor.

On this Reformation Sunday, it might be useful and faithful to spend a little time thinking about what being Lutheran means in our current context that now is far removed from those 16th century reformers like Martin and Katie Luther in Wittenberg, Germany. For me, this isn't an academic exercise but a witness practice.

Increasingly, in America and in the world, we'll be called upon to witness to what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Lutheran.

A couple of weeks ago as my adventure in Ecuador was starting out, Frank and I encountered a couple from Great Britain and agreed to have dinner together one night. Over that meal, we did the usual get-to-know you stuff. They were retired so we asked what they did in their work life. She had worked as a chemist; he worked in something impressive sounding with the British Royal Navy. Then they asked us what we did professionally. Frank said, we're both Lutheran pastors. Now, when we tell people what we do, several things can happen. They might say, "Oh, my grandfather was a Methodist pastor!" or they might ask a couple of questions trying to understand, or often people will just fall silent. With this couple, none

of that happened. When Frank said, “We’re Lutheran pastors,” the husband nearly exploded and said in a voice way too loud, “Well, we’re atheists!”. I think Frank countered by saying, “Yeah, atheists can be good people.” To which he yelled back, “we’re ALL good people.” That mostly ended our direct conversation about religion, but I knew our baptismal assignment in this dinner was to demonstrate we were intelligent compassionate people who weren’t idiots nor had we been brainwashed by aliens. With other people in our travels or social connections at home, we sometimes find ourselves fielding questions about how Lutherans and Catholics are different or sharing the details of what we do on a weekly basis in our work. The witnessing opportunities are increasing exponentially.

To be a witness to Christ, and a representative of all things Lutheran, let’s just say, we’d better have our elevator speech ready. There are many books you could read but won’t read on Lutheran theology, beliefs, history and practices. Hey, there are tons I haven’t read either. Simply put, our elevator speech about what is a Lutheran begins by pointing to the cross of Christ. A physical cross has two parts a vertical beam and a horizontal beam.

In the last couple of months I’ve noticed some buzz on the internet defining “vertical theology” and “horizontal theology.” Those are the two parts of the cross. Vertical theology is all about our relationship to God – the ways we worship the Lord and honor God with our lives. Horizontal theology is focused on how we love our

neighbor. It expresses itself in acts of mercy and justice. When we do both of these -- love of God and love of neighbor, we fulfill what Jesus taught us as the greatest of all the commandments.

What our Lutheran denomination has struggled to hold together for the past 508 years is how to teach and faithfully do both the vertical and horizontal in order to live our lives in the shape of the cross. I'll be honest – this is hard work. It also can be unpopular. Because of our human sinfulness and self-centeredness, it's easier to choose one direction or the other and call it a day. You can recognize the language and attitude of those who feel a vertical relationship is all that's really needed when they use phrases like "Jesus is my personal savior." It's also in examples like the one I often tell about the man in my home congregation who was faithful in church attendance and financial giving, but when I invited him to come to an event our youth group was hosting said, "I don't care nothing about the young people as long as I get to heaven."

Or I heard it most recently in a Facebook post that a Kindergarten teacher posted last week that said, her 40-year career abruptly ended when a six-year-old looked at her and said, "My Dad said people like you don't matter anymore."

We hear horizontal theology only when we people say things like, "I don't have to go to church or believe in God to be a good person." And then they list all the ways they are doing acts of mercy and justice.

As Lutherans, we have wrestled very openly with the tension between vertical and horizontal theology throughout our history. We express the vertical dimension in our classic belief that we are justified by grace through faith. For us, salvation is a gift from God, not a reward for our very good personal or social behavior. In worship, confession, baptism, singing, holy communion and even in our hospitality time, we express our dependence on God and our adoration of Christ. But, there's more.

Luther famously said, "God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does." And so, as Lutherans, we take that horizontal beam of the cross very seriously. Our faith turns us always outward toward others. It doesn't turn us away from them. Turning inward was how Luther defined what sin looks like.

As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, you can see this serious take in our consistent focus on social justice, racial equity, care for creation, advocacy for the poor, and interfaith cooperation. And so, hard as it is to balance, as hard as it is to carry a cross; we seek as Lutherans to live this cross-shaped life. This is who we try to be. Do we sometimes stumble as individuals, congregations, and the wider-church – of course. But this is our calling, and we trust our God who is our mighty fortress to help us make a way out of no way. Thanks be to God for all the gifts of the spirit and the gifts of one another. AMEN!