

Transfiguring Lutheranism

Being a Lutheran in New Contexts

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The title assigned to me calls for defining what it means to be Lutheran, what “new contexts” refers to and to reconsider the relationship between the two. I shall start with the “new contexts” and conclude with being a Lutheran.

“New contexts”

First, I shall assume that “new contexts” are not traditionally Lutheran contexts, and definitely not the context in which Martin Luther lived and theologized 500 years ago. “New contexts” are those in which Lutheranism and Luther himself were adopted centuries after the birth of the Reformer and in distant lands south and east from his birthplace. Luther was a German from Saxony, which at the time was a rather “backward,” underdeveloped, we would say today, corner of Europe. The Reformer himself was aware of his social location and used to brag about being “an ignorant German,” who was made fun of for not writing the tomes recognized as the standard of high theological scholarship. Above all, he was a pamphleteer, a man firmly rooted in his time, geography and environment, who was an occasional theologian. From this, some distinctive Lutheran theology and pastoral practices emerged. Even if these rapidly spread throughout northern Europe and developed a body of normative orthodoxy comparable to the erudite scholasticism that Luther had left behind, they were still bound to a relatively homogenous context.

It took more or less three centuries until Lutheran theology and pastoral practices started to speak languages other than the central and Nordic European ones. This happened first, on a minor scale, through the work of missionaries and, secondly, more massively through the waves of immigration from northern Europe reaching the shores of the Americas.

Four centuries after the Reformation, at the beginning of the twentieth century, just over a hundred years ago, the vast majority of Lutherans (more than ninety percent) were still to be found in the North Atlantic axis, namely, Germany, Scandinavia and the USA. This was still very much the situation a half a century later when the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was founded in 1947 at an assembly of world Lutheranism in Lund, Sweden. For the next two decades, LWF documents still referred to the “three blocks” that made up the visible constituency of the Federation: Germany, Scandinavia and the US as the “third block.”

So what about the “new contexts” referred to in the title of this article? They were largely invisible, particularly with regard to their claim of being Lutheran. “The three blocks” still had the hegemony of defining and adjudicating what Lutheranism was. “Hegemony”¹ is a term used in the social sciences to describe a social formation in which a given group has the hold on power and the intellectual influence to provide leadership without having to resort to overt use of force to sustain its dominion. Those kept under the dominion of hegemony are the subalterns. Subalterns are those who are deprived of power and unable or prevented from

¹ The concept was introduced by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. See *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, David Forgacs, ed. (New York: NYUP, 2000), pp. 249, 422-424.

exercising leadership.² In the case of the Lutheran communion, power was the money with which the “three blocks” financed the LWF’s operations, from World Service to Church Cooperation (precursor of the Department of Mission and Development) to Studies (precursor of the Department of Theology and Studies). Intellectual leadership was provided by the unquestioned supremacy of the Western Enlightenment tradition and its influence on the sciences in general and theology in particular. Outside the “three blocks,” there was no money to purchase a ticket for the fancy Lutheran cruise, nor did these “new contexts” master the etiquette deemed necessary to behave theologically in a “proper” manner. By etiquette, I mean the command of certain languages, familiarity with the concepts operating in the hegemonic discourse, access to the huge amount of literature produced in the centers of Reformation studies, the critical edition of primary sources, and so on and so forth.

The “new contexts,” our contexts, lacked power, felt inadequate to provide intellectual leadership that could challenge Western academics and, worse, they constituted a tiny minority. Hegemony always presents itself as having universal validity, the rest is the rest, and the rest is at best heresy, or does not even reach the status of a heresy.

In his seminal work that opens the history of modern Protestant theology, *Glaubenslehre*, Friedrich Schleiermacher, reflecting on the missionary work in distant lands, discusses the impossibility of new heresies appearing in Christianity. For him,

new heresies no longer arise, now that the church recruits itself out of its own resources; and the influence of alien faiths on the frontier and in the mission-field of the Church must be reckoned at zero.³

And then the great Berliner adds condescendingly:

... there may long remain in the piety of the new converts a great deal which has crept in from their religious affections of former times, and which, if it came to clear consciousness and were expressed as doctrine, would be recognized as heretical.⁴

But swiftly he dismisses any serious threat coming from that. Was he in for a surprise!

Schleiermacher was not a Lutheran, of course. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the situation in Lutheran circles was even more flippant. The debate was whether Jesus’ Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) was meant for the first apostles only (the position of Lutheran orthodoxy) and was then presumably fulfilled preempting any need for mission work, or whether it extended to every generation of Christians (the position held by Pietism) hence requiring missionary work. Nonetheless, unlike Schleiermacher, they did not even entertain the question of possible heresies creeping into the new converts’ faith.

This was the situation way into the 1960s, when for the first time the LWF, through its Department of Studies, started to take an intentional look at the interface between Lutheran churches and societies around the globe, creating, unsurprisingly, a crisis within the hegemony. The crisis was still manageable, but heralded things to come. Since then, in the

² Idem, pp. 210, 351.

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989) p. 96 (*Der christliche Glaube*, 2 vols. [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960] 1:128)

⁴ Ibid.

last few decades, only a fraction of the time Lutheranism has been around, a dramatic change has taken place, to which this meeting testifies.

Today, the LWF, which assembles ninety-five percent of all those who claim the Lutheran heritage, comprises 140 member churches, the majority of which are from outside the North Atlantic axis. They are from the planetary South. Small churches, most of them, but their membership makes up almost half of world Lutherans. They are now more than forty percent and growing, while the “three blocks” remain at best stagnant and in several places register declining membership. It is plausible that in a decade or so the planetary South will be home to the majority of Lutherans in the world.

This is only one aspect of this rapid transformation. Probably even more significant is the fact that unlike the contextual circumstances that set the agenda for the churches of the North, the planetary South has minority churches that are facing challenges not only from the traditional opponents of Lutheranism in the North Atlantic world (namely the Roman Catholics and the Reformed), but from a number of other religions next to whom these Southern Lutherans exist. Additionally, they are witnessing the emergence of robust new forms of Christian piety expressed by the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements often within the ranks of the Lutheran churches themselves.

These two factors, the growing number of Lutherans in the South, and the challenge they face from non-traditional neighbors, other faith traditions and new emergent pieties (the challenge of major minorities), have implications for Lutheran theology and pastoral practice whose breadth and depth we are only beginning to realize. To paraphrase Paul: Oh hegemony where is thy sting? Oh universal theology where is thy victory? Or, in the ironic words of a Brazilian poet, Vinicius de Moraes, “Ninguém é universal fora de seu quintal no one is universal outside their backyards.

This change, so radical and still far from having completed its entire revolution, significantly influences theology and is redrawing the face of Lutheranism (giving it a lift down, or a lift South). The changes to come are inevitable, as we shall see. This is not a triumphalistic paean: responsibility is increased, leadership needs to be provided and resources will have to be found from new sources. But meanwhile, who are those redefining the landscape of Lutheran theology? What is the claim to legitimacy that “new contexts” have to wear the Lutheran badge? Indeed very good questions, for more than one reason.

Representation

A fifth-century theologian, Prosper of Aquitaine, proposed a rule for theologizing that has been influential as it is simply descriptive of what happens with good theology: “The prayer of the supplicant—said he—shall be the measuring stick of theological doctrine” (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*⁵). The supplicant is the one who is under the weight of oppression, persecution, sin and trial. Although liberation theologies have made much of this, it was not their invention; it is an old church tradition. So what is this plea of the faithful supplicants in “new contexts” that presumably sets the agenda for theology? And why would that have to be cast in Lutheran lingo? Do we need to “import” Lutheran theological conceptions to express what is autochthonous, proper to these “new contexts”?

⁵ Migne, *Patrologia cursus completeus, Series latina*, 121 vols, (Paris:1844-1855), vol 51, p. 209

This is a complex problem because it first begs the questions of who is presenting or representing this agenda and how. One thing is the supplicants' plea; another is who speaks for them, who represents them. As we have seen, the hegemonic theology of the North Atlantic world spoke on behalf the supplicants and articulated their pleas. Consequently, the agenda was set in different variations of Luther's own well-known plea, How do I find a merciful God? But, who says what this means, whose voice represents the plea from these "new contexts"? Hence, it is the questions pertaining to this specific issue that are left for us to examine first, namely, Who speaks for Lutheranism today? Who represents Lutheran theology and pastoral practice? What is its face, its ethnicity, its nationality, its class and caste? What languages and accents carry it? Who are the authorized spokespersons? Do we need to immerse ourselves in Luther's own context, his language, European history from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment and beyond in order to represent Lutheranism or to be Lutheran in "new contexts"? What is its identity, what is proper to Lutheranism? Let us be blunt. Do we need the doctrine of justification and how it responded to medieval theories of atonement explained to us and then incorporate it into our theological work? What will set our agenda, the agenda of these "new contexts"?

These are not merely rhetorical questions and finding an answer relevant to these "new contexts" is an awesome and humbling task. Awesome and humbling, because talking about context is in itself a treacherous enterprise! In her now classical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁶ and in her in later works, the Indian philosopher and literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak develops a fascinating, albeit difficult, argument discussing precisely this question of defining one's context, of producing a representation, an image of a context, of an experience. She begins by engaging some of the literature on the Hindu practice of sati, in which a recently widowed woman would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. She probes the unexamined assumption in the literature that those writing thought that they knew what the widow's context was, either in avoiding the pyre or submitting to it. Spivak shows that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable distinction between that woman's experience, her actual context, the construction she makes of her identity, on the one hand, and the *representation* of the sati ritual when made by others in describing the woman and her place in the ritual. This representation by others, either when done by orthodox Hindus or by western anthropologists and other colonial agents, inscribe the ritual into a discourse fraught with moral, religious and political presuppositions. The one justifying the ritual will inscribe it within the traditional religious interpretation, while the one describing for a western audience will likely cast it terms of individual rights and inalienable freedom. But where is the woman in these discourses that reduce her to a gesture within a ritual that is either defended or decried?

Spivak's point is that when the widow is represented by a proxy, when someone wants to speak for her, i.e. present her context, paradoxically she loses her own voice and what remains is only a picture, a gesture that defies translation and interpretation. In fact, we are not dealing with contexts as such, for they are unstable realities, in constant fluidity. From the time people inhabited caves, representing is human. Otherwise, communication would be not be possible. Nonetheless, when we represent something or someone, when we speak on behalf of a context, we are stabilizing that which is very unstable, we are producing an image that can be passed on as a commodity and communicated to other contexts. This is similar to

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson / L. Grossberg (Ed.): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 271-313

a photo one takes of a landscape or a Hong Kong street market. It is never the same the second after the flash goes off and it comes to us in another context always demarcated by a frame that the photographer chooses not only when deciding what to portray, but always also what to exclude, what is deemed irrelevant for what one wants to present.⁷ One's communication to friends about the trip to Hong Kong, for instance, comes with a filter that brackets out innumerable other factors that are part of the experience, but will never enter the picture or be fully conveyed by it. Some contextual experiences, such as for instance speaking in tongues, possession, apparitions or manifestations of the dead, are difficult or impossible to communicate because they have no correspondence or analogies in other contexts. What happens to them? They are filtered out, kept outside of the frame or, then, psychologized or dismissed as exotic fancy. This happens to every context, including these "new contexts" the title of this article refers to.

Why is this important for us in "new contexts"? Because these have not only been defined by others, but have also been colonized by political, economic, ecclesial and military powers, including also their symbolic and religious systems, which the colonial subjects, the subalterns, had no choice but to buy into and negotiate with. Symbols, images, figures, concepts and doctrine circulating on the market of representations became the tools available for the construction of identities in "new contexts;" they have thus been defined, codified and filed.

So, what can we who have been colonized do? Should we not get rid of the symbolic system, with its imposed models of "democracy" or "communism," or religion and instead use only autochthonous images, representations, rituals and forms of governance? Why not get rid of a spurious legacy and imposed heritage and return to our roots, the autochthonous ground of our symbolic system? Most "new contexts" were formerly under colonial rule. A postcolonial condition is one in which the colonial power no longer has direct military and/or political dominion but whose symbolic systems and institutions linger as a specter fed and nurtured by a global imperial economy. Once symbols and representations of a certain reality have been implanted in a given context, it is virtually impossible to extricate them. The question is how to make use of them. What is important is not so much how a context is being represented, what images and symbols are being used, but who does the representation.

Transfiguration

If postcolonial theory has taught us anything then it is that it is a reflection on a practice, a practice of dealing with these haunting ghosts that we have grown accustomed to, for they have been with us for centuries. Such practice is the one of taking a symbolic figure that was part of a colonial project and investing it with new contextual meaning. In the words of Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagous Manifesto* published in Brazil in 1928, "We made Christ be born in Bahia [a state known for representing Brazilian culture at its best] or in

⁷ This is exemplarily studied in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217-251. Addressing film he phrases this reversal thus: "The audience's identification with the actor (*Darsteller*) is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values (*Kultwerte*) may be exposed." (pp. 228f.)

Belém of Pará [a city in the Amazon that is Portuguese for Bethlehem].”⁸ The point is not to dismiss Christ because he came with the colonial powers, but to turn him into a figure that can be indigenized. I have used the word “figure” (*figura*) to describe emblematic characters or events that, unlike concepts, symbols and doctrines, are rooted, grounded in concrete historical circumstances. Figures have a genealogy, a place and a time to which they belong. In addition, figures are capable of migrating across time and space and to find roots in other characters or events creating, in the words of Erich Auerbach, “a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.”⁹ When figures perform their migration they produce what Edward Said called a “contrapunctual”¹⁰ dissonance. The figure becomes the host of contextual experiences different from the ones it was originally invested with but in a certain way is also consonant with. A figure is the catalyst of different experiences at different times and in different places. We can call this the practice of transfiguration. A figure that was part of a given context reemerges in another and in it is trans-figured.

Take the story of Jesus’ transfiguration (Mt 17:1–13). It my contention that the passage needs to be read in the context of the preceding one in which Jesus foretells the disciple his coming passion and Peter rebukes him. Unlike what the people said of Jesus being Elijah or one of the prophets, even the greatest one, Moses, Peter had just confessed him as the son of God. Right confession? Yes! But wrong context! Jesus’ retort, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mt 16:23) was like saying, “Peter, don’t flee from your context, here is Elijah, here is Moses, it is also about them, they are also in me and with me.” That is precisely what happens in the narrative of the transfiguration. The figures of Moses and Elijah emerge from different times and contexts and their own mantle, which charged them with historical and popular repute, is laid upon Jesus. Their figures were transmuted (*metemorphothe* is the Greek word) to Jesus, and in him they again became alive and present. When the disciples remind him that the scribes said that Elijah must come before the Messiah, Jesus tells them that Elijah had already come and was not recognized. They realize that he was talking about John the Baptist. Now Jesus was also the new Moses, the liberator of the people. Here is this marginal Galilean claiming the staff of Moses when the high priests were those who sat in Moses’ chair. This is contrapunctual, yet the melody was the same: liberation like in the Exodus. For the disciples, it was at that moment that Jesus became contextualized and his figure became the host of all the relevant and cherished experiences of that Jewish context. Jesus was not the “son of God” out of this world above the ambiguities of history. In that context, Jesus, the son of God, was rooted in the history of his people; he was not the pristine “son of God” as Peter believed. Jesus embodied the ambiguous and frail history of the context into which he was immersed.

⁸ Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropófago,” in *An Anthology of Brazilian Prose: From the Beginnings to the Present Day*, R.L. Scott-Bucleuch and Mario Teles de Oliveira, eds. (São Paulo: Ática, 1971), p. 388

⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from Drama os European Literature: Six Essays*, Ralph Mannheim, trans. (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 53

¹⁰ See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 51, 259, *passim*.

Transfiguration: that is what postcolonial practice does. Consider these few examples from the history of Christianity. Christ, the mighty conqueror of the Crusades, of the Conquest, is transfigured into Jesus, our brother, the liberator, the companion on our journey and our struggle; he becomes our contemporary. The narrative of the Exodus, used as a symbol by the Afrikaners in South Africa and in the south of the USA by the US government to legitimize the expropriation of land from the Africans and the Mexicans, is transfigured into a narrative that gives expression to struggle and longing for liberation from oppression and slavery. The Franciscan spirituality of the Via Crucis with its fourteen stations, each telling the story from Jesus in Gethsemane, his condemnation by Pilate, to his body being laid in the tomb, is transfigured from an exercise that often borders masochism into a liberating reflection on the present condition of the people when even a fifteenth station, depicting the Resurrection, is added.¹¹ Sometimes the transfiguration is so thorough that we even forget its hybrid origin. For example, when Martin Luther King, Jr was given the name of his father, who in turn was named after the Reformer, that was a transfiguration. However, if you ask people in the USA today who Martin Luther was, meaning the sixteenth-century Reformer, a surprising number of people will say that he is the great black hero of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr King.

Transfiguration is the practice by which a figure from a given context has the potential for acting as a catalyst for experiences from other contexts, or when a figure from a given context embodies the spirit of figures from another context. This is the reason why we say that these contexts are hybrid. They inject autochthonous materials in what used to be an alien figure, often brought along by the colonial powers, initially to serve their own interests.

According to postcolonial theory there is nothing pure and pristine, we are all hybrids. “The universal word speaks only dialect,” as Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga so often insisted.¹² The art of postcolonial resistance is really to trans-figure that which came as part of the colonial enterprise, and use it as a weapon of resistance, disavowing hegemony the monopoly over the discourse. Even the “Lutheran” discourse (and the corresponding missionary enterprise) was a colonial discourse which defined and represented the subaltern’s plea. It went like this: “You are sinners under the threat of God’s wrath, but I bring you the gospel of justification of the ungodly!” Now the postcolonial consciousness retorts: “You have misrepresented my plea,” and the subaltern adds defiantly: “You don’t even know what you are saying when you use the word ‘Lutheran’ in ‘these contexts’.” Indeed!

On being a Lutheran

I have already suggested that “Luther” or “Lutheranism” functions as a figure that was brought to colonial contexts as part of the missionary work that was part of the colonial enterprise as such. The question is whether this figure can be transfigured and catalyze experiences far removed in time and space from those that originally gave rise to it. For a figure to inspire such new experiences, it must have intrinsic features that make it attractive as a host in the process of transfiguration, as Elijah was to give a profile to John the Baptist, or Moses to Jesus.

¹¹ See Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross*, (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp 160-176

¹² The expression is from Pedro Casaldáliga. *Creio na Justiça e na Esperança* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978), p. 211

As far as Luther is concerned, there are a number of motives that lend themselves to this purpose. Luther's rich but little studied creation theology can become a catalyst to address the ecological crisis (creation as the living mask of God). Luther's harsh criticism of emerging financial capitalism is as pertinent in the time of the global market as it was in the sixteenth century. His recognition of the cross of Christ in the suffering of a crucified world is strikingly similar to the arguments of liberation theologians. Luther's emphasis on the vernacular as the means for theological communication is as relevant today when English has become the lingua franca, as it was the case of Latin during Luther's time. Luther also saw the church (*ecclesia*) as an "order of creation" established by the institution of the Shabbat belonging therefore to all humankind, not only to Christians.¹³ This is what it means to be catholic and radically so: Islam is also church, Judaism is also church, Hinduism is also church, Shamanism is also church, and so forth (the Christian church is a community of believers that gather around the word made flesh and the sacraments, that is its particular shape). Luther's argument for Christ's presence not only in the person of Jesus or in the sacrament of the altar, but the whole of creation being there, according to the flesh, closer to anything as anything is to itself,¹⁴ is a surprisingly mute point in Luther studies done in the North Atlantic world but is something already known by the aboriginal people in Australia

There are a number of issues in Luther that need to be rephrased if not rejected altogether, including his last stance on the peasant's revolt, his doubled-edged pronouncements on Jews and Muslims, his disregard for the Epistle of James. But this always happens in transfigurations. To take the example of Moses and Jesus, it was Luther himself who said that we need to have all that is worthy in Moses and have it in Jesus, but we cannot have all of Jesus in Moses. In the process of transfiguration, the host figure is always enlarged and expanded. The original figure becomes *quasi* larger than life.

But what about the sacred cows of Lutheranism such as the doctrine of justification of the ungodly, or the law-gospel dialectic, or even the two kingdoms doctrine. The problem here is that, contrary to the positive and the negative examples referred to above, these "doctrines" have become so reified that their contexts can hardly be detected, they are doctrines and no longer figures, no longer attached to their contexts, and thus also incapable of migrating to other contexts.

This brings me back to Proper of Aquitaine's rule for doing theology: the plea of the supplicant is the measuring stick for theological teaching. Luther's doctrine of justification, to take the most prominent example, can only be properly understood against the background of Luther's own afflictions and despair in knowing that he was not pleasing God to merit grace. His "discovery" of God's unmerited grace is the key that opened the deadlocked condition in which he found himself. When he succinctly described his theological method, he followed a common three step process, popular in medieval theology.¹⁵ The two first steps that he described were prayer and meditation making clear, however, that prayer included talking to and about God, while meditation was not a solitary pondering of things divine, but reading and engaging books and other people in reflection. However, while in medieval theology the

¹³ See *LW* 1:80f.

¹⁴ *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb & Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 610 (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, art. VII). (*LW* 37:223f.)

¹⁵ *LW* 34: 283-288

third step was blissful contemplation of the divine mystery (*contemplatio*), Luther made a radical change. The final and decisive step in becoming a theologian was not peaceful and idyllic contemplation, but on the contrary; it was struggle and being on trial (*tentatio*, *Anfechtung*). His own experience as an outcaste, persecuted by religious and political powers, driven almost to madness by the occasional doubt that maybe he could be wrong, that is what he said made him the theologian he became. Experience, he said, is what makes a theologian,¹⁶ and not any existential experience of angst! He was talking about undergoing concrete persecution and trial, being afflicted. This was the deadlock to which justification became the key that released him. Only having the key, without knowing the type of lock it fits, becomes an exercise in irrelevancy.

So, what does it mean to be a Lutheran in the new contexts which are not traditionally Lutheran and being in the neighborhood of other faith traditions? How can we understand this relationship between the church being Lutheran and the contexts that are no longer of yore? Being a Lutheran cannot be seen as something that is separate or over against these new contexts. Being a Lutheran and for that matter the church itself can be understood only as a reality which is at the same time at ease and in tension between and amidst the new, diverge contexts. This is especially urgent considering the fact that we inhabit a world that is increasingly becoming religiously pluralistic and globalized. Adjacency becomes then a constitutive feature of the church as historically intended. The church cannot be an entity in and of itself and has never been. Not being of the world, it is still in the world. One cannot be a Lutheran apart from the multidimensional contexts—religious, political, economic or cultural—that borders and even inhabits ones own. We live in a world that is broken and damaged, but it is so in ways that need to be defined locally. And our identity as Lutherans does not lie in the laudatory proficiency in reciting articles from the Augsburg confession but in our willingness to be vulnerable so that while being immersed in the traditions of the church our theologizing is one that allows the cries of the broken, forsaken and the frail to interrupt our traditioned listening so that God's voice might be heard.

Today, when talk of justification is bandied about lightly, I am reminded of a parable.¹⁷ A man was given a key. A very special key, he was told, that would open the lock to the greatest treasure anyone could find, pure joy and happiness would be unleashed. He believed in the assurance that the key was indeed the secret to the most beautiful life one could imagine. He tried the key in all the locks that were imprisoning his life, and the key did not fit any of them. But the key, he surmised, was so precious that he decided to construct a lock that would fit the key, and so the key would finally be of use. Indeed, the key unlocked the custom-made lock, but it did not open anything. When “justification” language is bandied about, it is like the key in the parable and people receive it only to construct locks to fit the key, which do not open anything other than the lock itself. In Luther’s case, the key was so important because it opened a real lock that kept his life in fear and despair. Prosper’s rule applies; it opens the gates of joy and peace. The key is a real gift if, and only if, it opens the lock that holds us captive. The doctrine of justification, or any other doctrine of the Lutheran church, is irrelevant if it does not fit the plea of the supplicant heart, the broken soul and the damaged life.

¹⁶ LW 54:7

¹⁷ I first heard this parable from my former colleague, Prof. Reinhard Hütter.