No Matter Who

Augsburg University Chapel, 27 October 2026

Isaiah 58: 6-8

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator[a] shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

No matter who, no matter who, no matter who, no matter who
No matter who will stumble and fall, we will lift them up…

[Bret Hesla, "No Matter Who"]

In the summer of 2017, I had the privilege to accompany 30-some Augsburg faculty and staff on a tour of the Protestant Reformation and Luther sites in Germany – a special trip to celebrate the legacy of the Lutheran Reformation in its 500th year and to explore the continuing relevance of that legacy to our faithful work in the 21st century. As we celebrate the 509th anniversary of the Reformation, one moment stands out from that trip that has special meaning and power for me.

We stood on the balcony of the Francke Foundations building in Halle, looking out upon a large campus of buildings that once served as orphanages, schools, libraries, a publishing house and social welfare agencies. Established in 1695 by August Hermann Francke, a pastor and Lutheran theologian at the university in Halle, the foundations were a response by Francke and his colleagues to the ways in which Lutheranism in the 150 years after Luther's death had more and more developed a dogmatic approach to the faith. In response, Francke and his fellow so-called Lutheran Pietists sought to focus on the personal relationship the faithful had with God – the justification by faith alone that Luther had preached – which then freed them to meet the needs of their neighbors in ways that are very much part of our Lutheran faith tradition today – in schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, social service agencies, and so much more.

As I stood on that balcony, I was reminded of what my teacher Martin Marty has said are the distinctive marks of the Lutheran Christian tradition – "acts of mercy," he said. Acts of mercy. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor – no matter who.

Our former colleague Marty Stortz reminds us that Luther's focus on what he called the "priesthood of all believers" has concrete implications for our lives of faith in the world. The work of serving those in need, once the exclusive domain of the clergy and the religious (priests and monks and nuns), now belongs to all of us. We now are called to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread, to house the homeless, to cover the naked – as the prophet proclaims, this is the fast we

must choose. To walk alongside our immigrant neighbors, to undo the sins of white privilege and stand up for our fellow citizens, to care for the earth and all God's creatures, to welcome the stranger, to love our enemies – this is the work we are called to do.

As I stand here in this sacred space, able and privileged to peer beyond these walls to the city streets that surround us, I pray that acts of mercy may abide as marks of our faithful lives together in this place. I pray that the wideness of God's mercy may propel us to ever more courage and resolve and imagination as we do God's work with God's good creation – no matter who..

As the faithful at Halle understood, the work of the priesthood of all believers – the work we are called to do – is not simply a collection of acts of kindness and charity. Indeed our Lutheran Christian tradition compels us to think and act critically in addressing the root causes of the social ills that make our service to neighbors necessary. In other words, charity is not enough, service is not enough, hospitality is not enough.

In the midst of the flurry of new books and articles about Luther and the Protestant Reformation published in this anniversary year (several of which have been written by our own distinguished colleagues in the Religion department), I am especially intrigued by *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*, edited by Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee, which includes several provocative essays drawing our attention to the ways in which Luther and his colleagues offer

us a roadmap to the work of reconciliation, restoration and justice in the world today.

In particular, Carter Lindberg's essay "Luther and the Common Chest" shows how Luther and his colleagues fought against an ideology that "dresses up greed," that privileges the building up of personal profit at the expense of the common good, the needs and aspirations of all. As Lindberg states, "the biblical mandate to feed the poor is non-controversial. What is controversial is why people are poor and hungry." Luther focused on analyzing the causes of poverty and promoting government policies that moved beyond remedial philanthropy and charity to address the social and political roots of injustice and need.

The most concrete of these public policies and practices was the so-called Common Chest, established in Wittenberg in 1522, and a precursor of the social welfare systems we still recognize today. Funds intended to meet the needs of the neighbor were collected from various sources and held in common in an actual chest, overseen by wise stewards who would distribute the funds based on need – some were used for medical care, others to educate young children, still others as loans to help artisans establish businesses – a professional and institutional approach to providing health care, social services, education and business development that would build up the community – the precursors to the institutions we know today as expressions of our Lutheran faith – hospitals and universities and immigration agencies and social service providers – faith active in love for the neighbor, no matter who.

As we gather here today – grounded in the belief that we have been freed through faith to serve our neighbor, no matter who, may we find abiding inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast we celebrated earlier this month…

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace!

That where there is hatred, I may bring love.

That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness.

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony.

That where there is error, I may bring truth.

That where there is doubt, I may bring faith.

That where there is despair, I may bring hope.

That where there are shadows, I may bring light.

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted.

To understand, than to be understood.

To love, than to be loved.

For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.

It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.

It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

May we continue to be instruments of peace – may hope and history rhyme in our work together as God's faithful people – may justice rise up in our acts of mercy and our plumbing the root causes of social ills – may the needs and aspirations of our neighbors, no matter who, be the inspiration for our continued proclamation of the wideness of God's mercy. Thanks be to God. Amen.