IF THERE IS ONE INDISPUTABLE TRUTH WHICH EMERGED FROM MARTIN LUTHER’S POSTING HIS 95 REASONS WHY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, TO WHICH HE BELONGED AND SERVED, SHOULD ENGAGE IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT REFORMING ITSELF AND ITS PRACTICES BASED ON HIS READING AND INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURES IT IS THIS, YOU CANNOT EASILY KILL AN IDEA!

500 years since that fateful act in Wittenberg, the theological ideas and issues surrounding the reformation are still current today. In July of this year the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) along with the World Methodist Council signed the 2006 Joint Declaration of Justification, a Catholic-Lutheran accord which, affirms that eternal salvation comes thorough faith as well as good works. Yet, while this is a step in the right direction towards visible unity for Protestants and Catholics we are still some distance away from mutuality on a number of fronts including sharing the sacraments and the recognition of each other’s ministries.

Given that this is not a lecture and given that you could spend years studying all the elements and issues relative to the protestant reformation, which celebrates or commemorate 500 years today, I wish to take a small sample of one of the core issues Luther sought to address and contextualize it not from the perspective of an academic or an historian but simply that of a Pastor engaged in the ministry and mission of the church.

There is little doubt in my mind that one, if not the fundamental, issue on which Luther desired a conversation towards change was the Integrity of the Church. A number of practices were highlighted and addressed through his writings – the sale of Indulgencies, Christian freedom and Christian duty, Christian Belief and the translation of the Latin Bible into German. Combined, they sought to address a core issue, which is no less relevant today, the nature and practices of the church. The church, Luther by his theology declared, is inclusive.

I sometimes wonder if we truly appreciate what we are doing when we celebrate or commemorate these historical moments. Do we really believe, as Luther did, in a church which is by nature inclusive; and that the only qualification for membership is one’s faith in

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Christ complimented by faithful obedience to living out that faith? That the church loses its integrity if it is anything but inclusive? We are intimate with the knowledge that Indulgencies could only be bought if one had the resources, we are conscious that the freedom which he understood as the human capacity to choose Christ was interpreted by his hearers and readers as freedom from fear of death, oppression and repression; we are aware that for him all Christians had a duty of service towards one another within the community of faith; we know well that he was passionate concerning the understanding of the faith either as a Christian or as a Pastor so he produced the Small and Large Catechisms; and we often point to his translating the bible from the language of the privileged into the language of the masses for their edification as well as for their advancement. I know of no other way of connecting these critical and fundamental dots of Luther than by the principle of inclusivity; that in God’s economy all have the option to be included.

Some years ago just after my arrival on a trip to Delhi, I received a text message from the younger of my two (2) daughters asking me of my impressions of India. My initial response to her was ‘it’s complicated’.

It’s complicated! What a powerful and provoking truth that is.

It’s complicated to speak about Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism in the same sentence.

Sometimes our world, our theologies and our celebrations and or commemorations are just ... complicated!

I wish to use as a point for reflection on Luther’s idea of inclusiveness a well-known passage of scripture.

There are a few complicated parables uttered by Jesus in scriptures which are difficult to interpret, however, the three located in Luke 15 are not numbered among them. While it is true that the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin seemingly pale into insignificance in relation to the lost son (10-30), they are individually and collectively not complicated at
all. The reason, nature of and the purpose for sharing these parables are as clear as could be. Or so it seems.

In these three stories told by Jesus, we see a number of contrasts: we see the attitude of grumbling contrasted with the attitude of joy and celebration; we see the contrast between grace and judgment, we see the contrast of what is valued by humans and what is valued by God. And if that is not enough the entire sequence is initiated by a cultural and religious scandal!

These stories were told by Jesus in response to the murmuring of the religious leaders; the Scribes and Pharisees at Jesus receiving, eating with and playing host to, tax collectors and sinners – those who represented the ignored, the outcast and the untouchables in the community. Tax collectors were hated because they embodied foreign oppression and by how their unjust actions (double taxation) and sinners were those who broke the moral laws and were unfaithful in practicing the purity rituals. It was a religious scandal to offer them both recognition and hospitality as Jesus did!

The central issue of these stories is contained in a simple question to the religious leaders and by extension a simple question to us - will you join the celebration? I suspect, and it is merely a suspicion that both the religious leaders of the day as well as those of us in the global church today would respond to Jesus by saying, it's complicated!

Can we hear Jesus appealing to those to whom these parables are directed, which one of you...will join in the celebration of joy over the gift of grace rather than the death-dealing curse of judgment, will join in the celebration of joy over the recognition and embracing of one who was estranged but has now returned, will join in the celebration of joy over one who was excluded but now is included? Which of you will express a righteousness that is large enough to allow you to open doors of life to others or will your expression of your righteousness remain that immovable hinge which keeps the door firmly in place and securely locked?

All three lost stories have the same structure, they each begin with a question, which one of you; they each contain a story of losing and finding; each contains a celebration and each

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ends with the same moral truth – that which causes divine joy. There is seemingly nothing complicated here, or is there?

In our complicated world these two parables offer us two cardinal truths worthy of celebration.

**Firstly, they celebrated that which is VALUED AND VALUABLE**

There can be little doubt that for both the shepherd and the poor woman that which was lost was both valued and valuable. In the case of the sheep, the Gospel of Thomas identifies the lost sheep as the largest which places a significant economic value on the sheep. Luke does not do this and the fact that it was one of 99 yet a rigorous search was made for it and a celebration ensued suggests more a quality than a monetary cost - the sheep was valued by the shepherd!

In the case of the lost coin, this could have been the monetary gift she received when she got married, which would place a sentimental value or it could have been a small savings (ten days’ worth). Whether sentiment or survival, her one coin was valued and valuable to her.

For both the shepherd and the poor woman, that which was lost represented potential and realized worth. The sheep and the coin both added value to their owner’s lives and to their living.

The so called global village of which we are all a part is caught up in a vortex of survival issues characterized by two words, victims and victimizers. The church is surrounded by those who are lost - the victims of poverty, religious intolerance, gender and sexual discrimination, sexual child abuse, violence against women, human trafficking, social and political injustice, rugged popularism with its trending isolationist polices.

The church is equally surrounded by the victimizers - those who are the perpetrators and beneficiaries of their exercise of power, abuse, control and domination.

As Church, what is it that we value in this increasingly secular age, what has become valuable to us? Is it the survival of our liturgy, our polity, our mission, our ministry, our
power and influence or is it a concern about those who are lost and excluded? Maybe our response is simply, it's complicated.

The challenge facing the church is not to become either the victims or victimizers in the name of survival but to reflect our calling to become and continue to be an inclusive community – where all are offered the same grace and mercy we received at our conversion or even despite it, where all are valued and are therefore valuable despite it, profoundly because they are made in the image and likeness of God!

Our calling to be an inclusive community is also that which defines our identity as Church. Our posture and proclamation should declare that all persons are necessary, needed and affirmed as valued and valuable; it is a model of unity which honours diversity.

I am sure you know that if something is valued and is therefore valuable to its owner then its loss makes the owner vulnerable. Such a state represents a deficit of gifts and resources. It represents an unsustainable gap in life and in living. Life and living became less viable as a result of its loss.

The real complication here was that religious leaders, like those in Luther’s day were not prepared to recognize their own vulnerability simply because they did not value or considered valuable those who were labelled as lost. For them, such persons did not deserve to be recognized, did not deserve the gift of hospitality and therefore did not deserve the gift of community.

For them the scandal of Jesus offering recognition and hospitality to tax collectors and sinners was further compounded by His casting God in the role of a shepherd. Shepherds were considered shiftless, thieving trespassers, they were equally despised as were those whom Jesus recognized and offered hospitality. Yet, Jesus declared to the religious leaders, unless your righteousness, already secured, is open and vulnerable enough to recognize the value and worth of the other, the different, the separated, the rejected then it does not reflect nor represent the Spirit of God and frankly is not viable. In other words, their righteousness did not allow then to join in the celebration and therefore did not make God rejoice. Indeed, their righteousness resulted in a reversal of their position relative to that of the lost. Put in
simple uncomplicated terms their righteousness made their lives and their living non-viable.

Is our righteousness a barrier or a bridge to and for those who are excluded? Do we offer to others the dignity of recognition, the hospitality of sharing with, caring for and hosting them, in our pews, in our homes, in our hearts and in our faith, or do we maintain our distance reinforced by our unwillingness to grant them their personhood supported by a righteousness rooted in rituals, policies and positions which offers God no joy at all? Or do we still utter by our lives and our living, the centuries old retort, it's complicated?

A story tells of the good fortune of a hardworking Jamaican farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbour. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred goats. Immediately he received a hundred goats, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbour had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbour had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God's goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbour had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin expose the grudging spirit that prevents us from receiving God’s mercy. Only those who can celebrate God’s grace to others can experience that mercy themselves.

Jesus extends an invitation to us through these parables, will you join the celebration, will our response continue to be, it's complicated?

The parables not only celebrated that which is valued and valuable.

**Secondly they celebrated a REALIZED VISION** – A value adding mission of rescue, redemption and restoration.

Both the shepherd and the woman recognized their vulnerability, had a vision to restore viability and set out on a mission to rescue, redeem and restore that which was lost. The

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shepherd searched, the woman lit a lamp, swept and searched and both engaged in a community celebration when vulnerability was addressed and viability restored.

We cannot miss the truth that the rescue and restoration of the sheep and the coin were both life-giving and life-transforming. When we offer to those who are labelled as lost recognition and hospitality, which results in their conversion and the transformation of their circumstances, they experience in no uncertain ways that which is both life-giving and life-transforming! More, if they follow the pattern, established by Jesus, of offering to others what they have received themselves they become life-giving and life-transforming servants of God. It's really not that complicated at all...

Profoundly, a life-giving and life-transforming church always add value to life and to living! It is a church which does not require uniformity but with acknowledged tensions serves for the common good of all. A valued added and a value adding ministry produces hope - the language of life. It creates the climate for looking at the future and seeing the same as pregnant with possibilities because we are one with the God of possibilities and one with one another.

The challenge and mission confronting the global church is not to become either victims or victimizers in the name of survival, but instead to stand in the gap between the victims and the victimizers. This is the vision of a valued added and value adding ministry. We must never become victims of the dictates of this age of rigorous liberalism and growing secularism for that would mean the surrendering of our core values, nor should we yield to the pressures brought to bear upon us for from many sides in the effort to safeguard our identity or driven by the fear of losing ground or members or clergy or resources for that matter.

We must advocate for an inclusive community but not at any or at all costs. Jesus’ unless statements are still relevant today, unless you repent, you will perish, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you, unless your righteousness exceeds falsehood you will have no place in the kingdom. Unless you change your mind about and your relationships with me and with others, little will change. It’s not that complicated!

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Nor should the church become a victimizer with ultimatums, inflexible or absolute positions, prescriptions and proclamations without reference to the Gospel which is liberating without ever being legalistic.

Ours is the task of being vigilant, vocal and visible as we provide healing sanctuaries, as we advocate for those who are victims, even as we are equally expose, and challenge those who are the victimizers. It is possibly then that we will rediscover what it means to be viable in an age that despite its pretence and protest to the contrary, cries out for meaning and is starved of real community. **It’s not that complicated!**

What is our vision to address the vulnerability and the non-viability caused by that which is lost and is being lost to us through segregation, isolation, intolerance, inequity, conflicts, genocide, morals and values, through the destruction of our ecology, the innocence of our children and young people, the expressions, meaning and purpose of our faith?

What is our vision to restore viability among and within this community of faith so that there can be real and realized joy and celebration and that ultimately all of us will join in the celebration but far, far more critically, there will be joy not weeping in heaven?

I know it is not lost upon us that Luther asked his church for a conversation instead he was excluded, its lost upon me how often we are unwilling to even have a conversation about the issues which will not go away...

We are called and challenged through these two parables to celebrate those who are valued and valuable and we are equally called to celebrate the pursuit of a vision of value added and value adding mission of rescue, redemption and restoration so that hope will result and God will be pleased.

Will you join in the celebration or will you and I declare **...here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me** or will our refrain be, **it's complicated?**