

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

When my kids were young, there was a whole new kind of toy. It wasn't electronic. It wasn't virtual—they hadn't been invented yet. It wasn't even all that expensive--imagine that! But it was new, it was different, it was hot, and it was revolutionary. It was—the Transformer! Remember Transformers? They still make them today—probably more sophisticated, certainly more expensive, but basically the same principle. You have an action figure that turns into something else—it transforms. A muscle-bound purple guy, with a few twists and turns of the limbs becomes a fearsome fighter plane. A ferocious turquoise guy becomes a war machine. And so on. These toys are a little like child-proof caps on a pill bottle—it takes a child to figure them out. But figure them out they do, and they are enormously popular.

Tonight I want to talk about Jesus as Transformer. Not that I consider him to be a plastic action figure who contorts into something else. I actually have a plastic action figure Jesus that somebody gave me once, and he doesn't turn into a truck or a bazooka. Jesus as Transformer is the reason that we are here. Not to oooh and ahhh about his amazing superpowers and how he can change. But to give thanks and rejoice that through his love, through his life and death and resurrection and ascension, through his sending of the Holy Spirit, he has changed us, and all creation.

The cool thing about the Transformer line of toys is that they can be changed. You get 2 for the price of one. You, the person playing with the toy have the power to change the character from one to the other and back again. And in the movies and TV shows they change without young hands manipulating them.

But the even more awesome thing about Jesus the Transformer is that he changes us. Jesus the Transformer does not have to show off his superhuman powers to prove how powerful he is. He took care of that temptation right after his Baptism in the encounter with the Devil in the Wilderness. The Devil offered him a once in a lifetime chance to demonstrate his divine powers, and even sweetened the pie by arguing that he wouldn't be doing it for his own glory—he'd be doing it to help the very people he'd ostensibly come to help—the poor (“go ahead, turn the stone to bread...I know you can do it...”); the oppressed (“you could turn it around for all the people who are suffering under corrupt and evil governments...”); the sick (“you have the power of eternal life...just use it, if you are really the Son of God...”).

But Jesus did not come to earth to be a superstar—sorry Andrew Lloyd Weber. He did not come to wow us with his amazing feats. He did not come to be the new David gone global—even though people hoped and dreamed and prayed for that. Just knock the socks off them, Jesus, and we can be done with it. The disciples wanted that, the general

public wanted that, and Christians ever since have wanted that. But that's not what Jesus was. And that's not what Jesus is.

In our family, when one of us gets a little too self-absorbed, or doesn't listen to the other and interjects with something personal, we say, half-joking, half-admonishing, "It's all about me!" Well the thing about Jesus, Son of God, second person of the Trinity, savior of the world, is that you never have to say that about him. Even though it is. Central as he is to the salvation of the cosmos—to say nothing of you and me and the folks out there—his life and his death were about the transformation of the world, not himself, but the world. The world he so loved, the world that God so loved that he gave his only Son, so that the world might be saved by him. The world into which the Holy Spirit erupted in tongues of flame and flaming tongues on Pentecost, transforming the lives of all who were there, and all those whom they met—going viral in a way never seen before or since. The world, whose creation Wisdom celebrates, troubadour and poet laureate to the Creator of all that is, "rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race."

Jesus is there, the reason for it all, the core, the center, the *raison d'être*. At Christmas time we are sometimes known to say smugly at some display of excess: "Jesus is the reason for the season." True. But not just the season of Christmas. Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Synod Assembly—Jesus is the reason for all the Seasons!

We are fascinated by the life of Jesus—what he said, what he did, how he lived, how he ticked. And it turns out that it is not only Christians who are interested. Scholars since the 19th century have engaged in a quest for the historical Jesus. Others claim a piece of him. To Jews he is a prophet whose misguided followers thought he was Messiah. To Muslims he is a great prophet, but subsidiary to the prophet Mohammed. To others, he is seen as a good man, a teacher, healer, political activist, prophet, social worker, friend of the friendless, and much more. And there is a strong tradition within Christianity to attribute all of these things to Jesus, to see him in one light or another, depending on our need. "What a friend we have in Jesus..." "O Word of God Incarnate" "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead US" "Jesus, Priceless Treasure." "O Son of God, in Galilee you made the deaf to hear.." And so on. None of these roles would we deny.

But, Jesus as Transformer trumps them all. Jesus as Son of God, Redeemer of the world is not just a great healer, teacher, advocate, friend. He is one who transforms. And he transforms not himself, but us.

The theme of our weekend is education. "Learning in Christ, Living in Faith." It is such an important thing to Lutherans, and we look to Jesus as teacher to set us on the right track. Multigenerational—Jesus took the children on his lap and defended their right to be near him from those who thought them too young. We even have the story of his own youth, when he scared the bejeebers out of his parents by staying behind in the temple when the rest of the village had started for home. Multigenerational. Across classes—Jesus taught and healed Pharisees as well as slaves, women as well as men. Barrier-breaking—he ate with sinners and tax collectors, healed and taught Gentiles and

Samaritans. He instructed the Devil in the Wilderness and the Pharisee (Nicodemus) in the middle of the night.

Jesus interpreted that law, told stories and parables, preached and illuminated Scripture. Jesus is a great model of a teacher for our church as we strive to engage people in the study of scripture through the Book of Faith, as we encourage congregations to provide adult education, to offer learning opportunities for high school kids once they have finished Confirmation, to find ways to engage young adults as they juggle their busy lives, to provide continuing education and lifelong learning to a generation of busier-than-ever, more-indebted-than-ever pastors and lay leaders.

But orders of magnitude more important than Jesus as teacher of the year, Jesus as teacher-trainer, Jesus as model teacher is Jesus as Teacher-Transformer.

I love education. I support public education. I was the director of continuing education in the Montana Synod for 18 years, I think that there is no such thing as useless learning. All learning is important. My Chinese anthropology class taken on a whim in college was incredibly helpful when I was a campus pastor at MIT. When I hear students worrying about a course of study that will guarantee them a job—nothing does anymore—I advocate learning for learning’s sake. I still have a tract I got from my daughter’s undergraduate school 8 years ago promoting education for civilization’s sake. It was called “The Usefulness of Uselessness.”

But. As Christians we understand that all that we have is from God, and that all that we do is to the glory of God.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic power, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

This is our vocation as Christians. This is our mandate as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.”

We learn in Christ and live in faith so that we may live out our vocation as called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world. It’s about the world. We learn in Christ and live in faith, not to edify ourselves, but to participate in Christ’s transformation of the world. And so we learn and grow and share to be equipped to participate in that transformation, bearing witness to God’s creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity in the world.

Tonight we recognize and install a group of people who have been meeting since September—a kind of brain trust, and action committee, people who have accepted the

invitation to help us individually and collectively to take concrete steps to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity in the world. This group is called the Mission Table and they come to us with a Mission Outreach Strategy—that means stretching beyond who we are today to reach new people—and Mission Support Strategy—that means stretching, encouraging and educating us to support financially the mission of the church.

This group of people come from across our synod—clergy and lay, male and female, east and west, north and south, young and less young. They are a portable table, offering a moveable feast, as it were, and we lift them up at this assembly to launch them and pray for their work. Because their work is our work. And our work is God's work. God's work. Our hands.

Jesus the Transformer will make all things new, even us, even the Church.

“Love never ends. But for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love, abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Amen.