The assembly opened with morning prayer, led by Pr. Scott Kiehn. This was followed by a recognition of LPAs who have recently finished the LPA program.

Keynote Address I: Dr. Mary Jane Haemig (a summary)

“Free, Free, Free…for what?”

Why bother with this Reformation anniversary? Some people say, “It’s an interesting historical event but very removed from our own time. We live in different times; it really doesn’t have anything to say to us today.”

But Dr. Haemig said, the reformation was all about freedom. “And the truth will make you free.” But what did freedom mean for Luther?

1. Free from what? Let’s start with our own lives. We are constantly evaluating and being evaluated…in all our vocations. Evaluation seems hardwired into our existence. We even do it to ourselves. Are we as happy, successful, creative as we should be? But all this evaluation can become oppressive. The standard becomes higher and higher and we fall short. It can result in fear, anxiety, depression or on the other hand, pride and hubris.

Martin Luther lived in fear of evaluation, specifically believing that God was always negatively evaluating him. God demanding that we be just like God. And God keeps score. If the score is against you, you have a lot to fear.

Medieval theology did talk about grace but it said, grace is not enough. Luther experienced the slavery of this. If you want to be reconciled to God, you had to work for it. So Martin lived in fear of an angry, vengeful God.

In his reformation breakthrough, Luther realized that the righteousness of God, is the righteousness that God gives away. Instead of God demanding something, God gives. God gives righteousness to you and to me as a gift. And all the other qualities of God are not what God keeps but what God gives away.

The result is freedom. Free from worry about whether we have earned salvation. Free from serving and being oppressed by the system of evaluation.

Because we don’t have to live under this system of evaluation, we can live in hope and in peace. Free to live in a trusting relationship with God. It’s all about relationship. God has chosen to make our relationship with God a matter of faith and not of works. We are free, not from doing good works, but free from the constant evaluation that goes with that.

We are also freed from seeing everything as a commodity. “Salvation. Not for sale. Human beings. Not for sale. Creation. Not for sale.” (from the Lutheran World Federation.) These are all gifts from God. They are not for sale. They are not commodities.

1. Free for what? Luther talks a lot about how we live in this world. He talks a lot about vocation and honoring each person’s vocation. Our freedom is a freedom to live out these vocations. A freedom to serve our neighbor, a freedom to please God.

Freedom for: listening to your neighbors, really hearing them, before you pretend that you know what is best for your neighbor. Freedom for: relating to people that we might not otherwise relate to…the different neighbors or hard-to-get-along-with ones. Freedom for: taking risks and trying new things. New ways of serving our neighbors or new ways of using your creativity. Freedom for: losing and failing (failure does not mean God’s condemnation...instead, God forgives us and sends us off into the world once again to serve the neighbor. Freedom for: admitting you might be wrong. Freedom for: using all of your God given gifts, a chance to rediscover your talents. Freedom for: taking care of yourself. Freedom for: appreciating God’s commandments. God has given us some clear indications about how He would like us to live on this earth. Freedom for: evaluation because evaluation is no longer oppressive but helpful.

1. So what? During this Reformation anniversary, we are celebrating the rediscovery of the Gospel. Luther’s only importance is that he helps us rediscover the Gospel today.

Do you consider freedom a possession? Or a relationship? “These are my rights as an American” is a statement of seeing freedom as a possession. We have all these rights and sometimes see freedom as, “We don’t want anyone telling us what to do. We don’t want restraint.” As Americans we spend a lot of time talking about rights and freedoms and how we can keep them.

Martin Luther reminds us that any freedom we have ultimately comes from God and is to be exercised not for the self but for the neighbor. This is freedom as relationship. Not as possession. It’s freedom FOR service, not FROM service. Not to do whatever we want.

Luther’s talk of freedom helps us to appreciate that we do not live for ourselves. We are definitely free from many things, but we need to constantly ask ourselves, “What are we free for? What are we going to do with our freedom?” That freedom is not for me or for you. That freedom is for God and the neighbor.

Keynote II: Mary Jane Haemig (a summary)

What Kind of God Is This?

A generous God. God redeems without any merit or worthiness on our part. God sanctifies because, out of our own strength, we cannot believe.

We also have a God who hears prayer. We have an attentive God who both speaks and listens. It is not a one sided conversation. God wants people who will talk back. God demands us to pray, God promises to hear us, God provides the words.

God wants so badly to hear from us that he commands that we pray. And he promises to hear us. Conversation is an integral part of the Christian faith. It is not because we are worthy that God hears us. (Medieval theology said “God hears your prayer if you are good enough.”) Luther said this is not true. God hears our prayers not because we are worthy. Worthiness is not an issue. We pray, after all, because we are unworthy to pray and Luther continually points to biblical example of all sorts of people who are unworthy to pray. God hears us because God wants to hear us.

We have a God who wants to hear from us in times of need and at all times. Luther recommends that prayer be the first business in the morning and the last at night. What should we do in times of need, doubt and despair? We should pour out our complaints to God. We have a God who wants bold words and honest prayer. With God we can talk honestly about our life. And we can be blunt with God.

We also have a God who hears and responds to the powerless and distressed. God does not let you go unanswered.

We also have a God who can change. God allows himself to be prevailed upon and subordinates his will to ours, through prayer. So Luther says, if we might actually get what we ask for, why aren’t we praying? This should spur us on to prayer in all our dangers.

We have a God who is really willing to listen and really willing to change. But this might make us nervous. Do we really want God to change? In some things, God will not change. God wants all humans to be saved. He wants all humans to believe in forgiveness through Jesus Christ. But Luther said we cannot have the same certainty in bodily matters. So, ask for God’s help, but leave it to God’s will as to whether he will help immediately. Luther was confident God would ultimately help. But if he does not help immediately he will strengthen the heart and give strength and patience.

We have a God who, even when saying no, still cares for us. We are to have confidence that we are favored by God and dear to God.

We also have a God who wants us to combine prayer with action. The life of prayer and of action are to happen together. Prayer is imbedded in all of our life. God wants to work through us, but he also wants to hear from us.

This God is in relationship to us, and relationship dies without conversation.

Because God stands ready to help Luther says that all depends on us crying to him.

After a Question and Answer session, the assembly broke for lunch.