

This is an edited version of a sermon I preached at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Brown's Point on May 29, 2016. The text is the first reading for the Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year C).

Is PLU Lutheran Enough?

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart.

⁴¹"Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built."—1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43

I was asked to say something about PLU. I chose the reading from I Kings because it points to an essential element of what PLU has been called to do as a Lutheran University. It also addresses a basic misunderstanding about the purpose of Lutheran higher education.

Perhaps you remember this story from Sunday School or Bible study. Solomon, son of David (Israel's greatest king) has just completed the temple in Jerusalem. It's the temple that his father always hoped to build. Archeologists tell us that Solomon's temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The reading is from Solomon's prayer at the dedication. It's an **interesting** prayer. In my role as University Pastor, I'm often called upon to pray at official functions, so I pay close attention to prayers and unashamedly borrow from the good ones. You can tell a lot about what's important to people by listening to their prayers. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, the ancient church fathers said. "The law of prayer is the law of belief." What we pray reflects what we believe as much as what we do.

So think about Solomon's prayer in this light. He begins by praising God: "There is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant [i.e., keeping promises] and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart."

In his prayer, Solomon recognizes a God who **loves creation** and **always keeps promises**. That's key; **God loves creation** and **always keeps promises**. But he goes on, "When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they all hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm"

[this is a reference to the Exodus when God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt “with a mighty hand and outstretched arm” according to the Scripture]—“when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then **hear** from heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, **so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you**, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.” So Solomon sees the temple as a witness to the God who loves creation and keeps promises. Now that’s not just an interesting prayer but an even more interesting God!

Solomon anticipates a time when people will come to the temple in Jerusalem to see what all the fuss is about and when they pray, he’s asking God to hear their prayer as a witness that, in fact, the God of Israel is a loving and faithful God. In the ancient world, most people would have prayed for God to defeat their enemies or at least convert them. But Solomon is asking God to hear their prayers so that non-Israelites will experience God’s steadfast love and faithfulness for themselves.

You could think of Pacific Lutheran University in much the same way as we carry out our mission of Lutheran higher education. One of the wonderful gifts of the Lutheran Reformation that often impresses outsiders (just like Solomon’s temple) is our commitment to education and especially higher education, i.e., Lutheran colleges and universities like PLU. In fact, for some strange reason, it’s “outsiders” (i.e., non-Lutherans) who often appreciate this gift more than us Lutherans who seem to either take it for granted or aren’t aware of it. Nevertheless, it is an incredible gift for which we should be grateful and which we’re called share with a world in desperate need of it.

Remember that the Lutheran Reformation began in a university. Martin Luther was a teacher committed to making sure people could read and write and study the Scriptures in their own language so that they could learn for themselves about **the same steadfast and loving God that Solomon prayed to**. That commitment to critical study and learning led to a deep and abiding belief in the importance of education for all people (not just Lutherans!) at all levels—from preschool to graduate education—that Lutherans have been justly famous for throughout our 500-year history. Pacific Lutheran University is an expression of that Lutheran commitment to education and learning.

But take it a step further. For Luther, learning was never an end in itself. It was always **learning for the sake of serving our neighbor** who, as Jesus taught us, is anyone in need that God places in our path. So Philipp Nordquist’s history of PLU is appropriately entitled, **Education for Service**. At PLU, we teach about what Martin Luther called *vocation*, i.e., the place where God calls us where our deep joy and the world’s deep hunger (i.e., our neighbor’s need) come together.

You can't get away from vocation at PLU. Every student and faculty member, every administrator and staff-person, everyone on campus regularly thinks, talks, and writes about vocation. We have programs and courses about vocation. We have Days of Vocation. We even joke about it (which is how you know its part of the culture!) "How am I being called to serve my neighbor using the gifts, passions, and opportunities that I have been given?" That is a very Lutheran question that we ask all the time at PLU. In fact, we believe that if more people asked that question, the world would be a better place. As our President, Tom Krise, likes to say, "The world needs more PLU."

These are some core elements of Lutheran higher education:

1. **Critical questioning of current knowledge and values**—If Martin Luther hadn't been willing to critically question the values of the institutional church of his day, there would have been no Reformation.
2. **Freedom for expression and protection of learning**—Academic freedom, the ability to ask question and look for answers wherever our search might lead, no matter who it makes uncomfortable is a very Lutheran principle.
3. **A liberating foundation in the liberal arts**—A basic understanding of history, language, art, religion, culture, ethics, philosophy and science is a foundation for all more specialized knowledge, c.f., PLU's ROTC program.
4. **Learning and research within community**—Nobody pursues an education alone. We were meant to collaborate with each other. It's built into our DNA. Even an online course assumes there's someone on the other end helping to lead and guide us while we study in front of our laptop.
5. **The intrinsic value of the whole creation**—Lutherans understood ourselves as environmentalists and stewards of the created world before it was trendy because we believe that when God called the creation, "Very good!" God meant it!
6. **Discerning one's vocation in the world**— "How will I serve the neighbor using the unique combination of gifts, experiences, and opportunities that God has given me?"
7. **Service to the advancement of life, health, and wholeness**—At PLU, we educate students for service to the *common good*; a concept that desperately needs to return to our national and international conversation.¹

We've summarized all this into our mission statement: ***The mission of Pacific Lutheran University is to educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and***

¹ "Core Elements in Lutheran Higher Education", (<http://www.plu.edu/lutheran-studies/core-elements/>), Editor: Dr. Samuel Torvend, University Chair in Lutheran Studies, Copyright © 2012 Lutheran Studies at Pacific Lutheran University

care—for others, for their communities, and for the earth. That's a very Lutheran mission statement and I can tell you that everyone at PLU without exception is deeply committed to it.

So when you wonder about whether Pacific Lutheran University is “Lutheran” enough, remember that we are ***not*** a church. Our call is not to preach the gospel. That's the vocation of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Brown's Point and all the other Lutheran and non-Lutheran churches.

We have a different vocation which is to be a university. Don't judge us by the number of chapel services we offer—although we offer excellent weekly Morning Prayer services attended by faculty, staff, and students. And don't judge us by the size of University Congregation although I can promise you that there is a lively and vibrant group of students and faculty (including our President) who gather each week around the Word and Sacraments as University Congregation. Don't judge us by the number of Lutheran students or faculty we have, although I can also tell you that while our numbers may be smaller than they once were, we are mighty! The fact that there are so many non-Lutherans at PLU is a testament to the power of Lutheran higher education. They want what PLU has to offer!

Judge us by our mission—the vocation to which God has called us—of educating students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and care. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we know we have been saved by God's grace alone. Like Solomon, we worship the God who loves creation and keeps promises! So the question for us as Lutherans is: “Now that we know that we've been saved by God's grace alone, what will we do with our one wild and precious life?” At PLU, we are committed to helping students of every religious belief and understanding to answer that question. By the grace of God, students and faculty from all faiths and from no faith are responding to that mission, drawn by the Spirit, just like the people that Solomon prayed would come to the temple. That's a mission that is worthy of your respect and support. In Jesus' name. Amen
(jpr)