

Reformed and Always Reforming

sermon digest

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Ephesians 2:1, 4-9, 17-22

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Today is a day of spectacular celebration in many Protestant churches. On this day almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther wrote the Archbishop of Mainz, protesting the sale of indulgences. "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" Luther's protest was at two points: the church wringing the hard earned money of the poor and the treatment of God's forgiveness as if it were a commodity for sale. Some dispute surrounds whether Luther actually posted what would become known as his *95 Theses* on the door of Wittenberg Church or merely sent a letter to the archbishop seeking to spur scholarly inquiry and deliberation. Whatever the case, his words went viral. Thanks to the benefits of the newly available printing press. Luther's *95 Theses* were quickly translated from Latin into German, printed, and distributed throughout Germany and Europe. And the Protestant Reformation was off and running.

Today we look back and celebrate the foresight and courage of those who risked their lives and according to the teaching of the church of the day, their very salvation in order to bring about change in the church, its theology and its practice. The great discovery or *re*-covery of the church as the people of God, salvation by faith alone, the primacy of God's grace and forgiveness, the laity's access to scripture, and the responsibility of the believer as priest—all of these took root in the emerging church and shape it still today.

We celebrate the Reformation in history; but more than just looking back, we look around us at the church of which we are a part; and we look forward to the church of the future. As Lutheran pastor JoAnn Post puts it, Reformation Day "is not merely an historical romp, a tip of the hat to giants who once roamed the earth." Rather, "we celebrate the gift of adoption into God's family, a family of God's choosing, not ours. We celebrate the gift of truth, a truth written on our hearts by God's hand. We celebrate the gift of reform, God's tireless efforts to fashion a Christ-like body from these rattling bones, this dusty frame" ["A Humber Reformation," workingpreacher.com].

Reformation Sunday calls us to experience in the depths of our being the fundamental acknowledgment that the Reformation is not done. The church is reformed, but it must recognize that it continues still in the unfinished condition of always needing to be reformed. We are called back to place our feet solidly in the great affirmations, the great leaps forward in understanding the nature of Christ's church that meet us in the Protestant Reformation. We are also called forward to question ourselves at the very core of our being about how well we are doing embodying Christ's church today.

The church lives out of the freedom of Christ. The Gospel text being read today by churches all across our land is taken from John 8. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. And if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:31-32, 36). Freedom, however, is somewhat frightening. Like a newborn baby who prefers the comfortable feel of a close, warm embrace or a snugly wrapped blanket to the insecurity of unfamiliar wide open space, we tend to cling to our own security blankets. Secure in what we have said and known and done in the past, we are prone to resort to the oft repeated refrain: we've never done it that way before!

We smile knowingly at the protest raised to Jesus' words by those in the audience John simply calls them "the Jews." "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" (8:33). Yet, if we are honest and it is good to be honest in church, we, too, have our issues with freedom. We can become so busy staking out our claim to right belief, right practice, right denomination or non-denomination that, to play on Luther's great hymn, we erect our own mighty fortresses—fortresses that steel us against the winds of time and the movement of God's spirit. It reminds me of Serena, a small child in our church in St. Louis, who as her prized baby blanket began to unravel into small squares, came to church securely clutching still a small handful of the squares. We fail to see that our fortresses have degenerated into little more than a minimal faith of low expectations, making us prisoners and slaves, not the commanders of our ship that we would wish to be. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul shouts in his great Magna Carta to the Galatians. "Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (5:1).

Only, JoAnn Post insists, as our hands are freed of "the chains of holy hubris" can we reach "for the gift of trembling truth." Just as it was true for Jesus' and Martin Luther's detractors, so it is true for us.

Change is built into the very foundation of the church. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God," the writer of Ephesians proclaims (1:8). This bold

proclamation became the marching orders for the Reformation. The foundation of faith does not reside in a perfected theology or institutional structure. It resides in the startling recognition of the gift of God in Christ. “[Christ Jesus] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (17-20). If, then, you want to know what the church should be and do, if you want to know what you and I as members of the church should be and do, look to who Jesus was and get in touch with his mission in the world today.

For many in our society, the time of the church resides in the past. Judging its many shortcomings and denying its continued significance, some have rejected the church outright or merely found it irrelevant. As is always the case, the current crisis is a time of opportunity—a time for going back to our roots to discover who we are. On the manner of the ancient builder who determined the lay of an entire architectural structure by the placement of the cornerstone, we gather as church to break bread as a community and to hear our story. We are reminded of who we are and know ourselves to be called to go out from the church to live out the purposes of God. In the words of Verna Dozier, “it is the task of the church, the people of God, to minister within the structures of society. It is the role of the church, the institution, to support that ministry” [*The Dream of God*, 142]. It is about being attentive both to the dynamic movement of God’s spirit and the continuing ebb and flow of the changing need in the world into which we go.

It is, Dozier insists, about a risky kind of kingdom-of-God thinking. It is not about absolute certainties that we nail down and sail blindly into life gripping with our very lives. It is about seeing through a glass darkly but acting and living still. It is about the very nature of faith itself.

I will live by the best I can discern today. Tomorrow I may find out I was wrong. Since I do not live by being right, I am not destroyed by being wrong. The God revealed in Jesus whom I call the Christ is a God whose forgiveness goes ahead of me, and whose love sustains me and the whole created world. That God bursts all the definitions of our small minds, all the limitations of our timid efforts, all the boundaries of our institutions [144].

“You shall have no other gods before me,” God commanded Moses and commands us still today. Faith is not about holding onto a tiny fragment of a security blanket. It is about opening ourselves and opening Christ’s church to the fullness of the God we know in Christ. It is about taking seriously the shape and destiny of the church as it is defined day by day by who he is, not who we wish him to be. It is about the wideness of Christ’s freedom and the exhilaration of his calling. It is about our best efforts and our best selves given in faithful service to the world that he loves. Thanks be to God!