

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Reformation Day (Observed) - Year A
32nd Sunday of Quarantine (33rd Overall)
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36
10/25/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

31 Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." 33 They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Reforming... Still!

Good morning! Off to the side of Christ Chapel at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary is a small walled garden. And in that garden you will notice a wall with a few random pieces of stone and block that

doesn't match the material used along the rest of it. They sit at the very center, and so it's clear that their inclusion is a deliberate decision; the block-layer didn't just run out one day and decide to use whatever they could find lying around. One of the pieces is from the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Another is from Athens, Greece. And the third is from the city of Worms in Germany, where Martin Luther took his stand. It is in the nearby city of Wittenberg that we Lutherans like to say the Reformation got its start.

Now, the truth is always a little more complicated, but it's generally agreed that when Martin Luther posted (not nailed) the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, it kicked off a movement that changed Christianity forever, the Reformation. But the posting of a document on the door wasn't anything unique. When a teacher or student wanted to debate something, they would post the topic on the church door, sort of like a local bulletin board. What made this time different is that someone got a hold of the document, translated the Latin that Luther had used into German and using this fancy thing called the printing press, started pumping out pamphlets all over the place. The rest, as they say, was history.

One of Luther's main points of frustration was the selling of indulgences, a practice where one could pay the church for a certificate that would get their soul out of purgatory and into Heaven. "But what about my dead grandparents?!" One might ask. "Well, don't you worry yourself one bit!" the traveling salesman Johannes Tetzel would answer, "just buy their salvation too! Once the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!" It's not the Church's finest fundraising idea, and it made some Catholics very angry.

“You can’t buy your way into heaven!” Luther argued, and you certainly couldn’t pay off your sins. If that was the case, why end the system of Temple sacrifice that had been in place for so long? No, it was wrong, and something needed to change. But, Luther found out, Rome was reluctant to abdicate its power and eventually the Church was split. On one side were the Catholics, and on the other were those protesting the abuses evident in the church, which is how the name “Protestant” began to be used.

Our salvation does not come from our works, but by the loving grace of God, shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This became central to the theology of the Reformation, and it continues to sit at the heart of Lutheranism. It’s the work of God, not our own merit, that has changed the world. It wasn’t easy for Martin Luther; the decisions made by those early reformers were tough ones to make. And yet, the Church survived. Which brings us back to those blocks in the wall at Southern Seminary. During a sermon my first year at the school the Seminary pastor made a wonderful point. These stones all marked critical decisions and times within the history of the Church. Nothing was easy for the Apostles after Jesus’ resurrection in Jerusalem, and they had never planned to start a “new” religion that would split from Judaism. But the Holy Spirit was at work creating change, pushing them towards a new understanding. It was in Athens that the Church was guided by the Holy Spirit to spread the Gospel to everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike! Likewise the split of the Reformation was something that I doubt Luther expected when he posted that note on the church door. But again, in Worms Luther took his stand, and the Holy Spirit was still at work.

If you could summarize these moments of the Church, I think the phrase “times of uncertainty” might do it best. Does that sound familiar? Once again the church finds itself amidst a time of uncertainty. But once again, the Holy Spirit is patently at work, pushing, nudging, and sometimes dragging the Church in new and exciting directions.

This won't be easy, and it won't be perfect. But things have never been that way. The Apostles made mistakes too, and while the reason for the Reformation was important and necessary, the Church was shattered into a thousand different pieces. But, God has remained faithful, ushering in times of change and new direction for a Church that is always reforming. It can feel like a time of great uncertainty, but God will always remain in control. So I leave you with the words from today's readings, words that shine bright with confidence and comfort for a people who sometimes need a little reminder.

From the Psalms:

*“1God is our ref- | uge and strength, a very present | help in trouble.
2Therefore we will not fear, though the | earth be moved, and though the
mountains shake in the depths | of the sea; 3though its waters | rage and
foam, and though the mountains tremble | with its tumult. 4There is a
river whose streams make glad the cit- | y of God, the holy habitation of |
the Most High. 5God is in the midst of the city; it shall | not be shaken;
God shall help it at the | break of day. 6The nations rage, and the |
kingdoms shake; God speaks, and the earth | melts away. R 7The Lord of |
hosts is with us; the God of Jacob | is our stronghold. 8Come now, regard
the works | of the Lord, what desolations God has brought up- | on the
earth; 9behold the one who makes war to cease in | all the world; who
breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the | shields with fire.*

10“Be still, then, and know that | I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted | in the earth.” 11The Lord of | hosts is with us; the God of Jacob | is our stronghold.”¹ Amen.

¹ Psalm 46 NRSV