

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Reformation Day - Year B
87th Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36
10/31/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

31Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” 33They 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?’” 34Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36So 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.

Reformation Day!

Good morning! Today is Reformation Day! One of two normal days in the year when we get to wear red! In the text study group that meets on Monday afternoon we were discussing how most average parishioners who show up on a Sunday probably don't understand fully what it means that

today is Reformation Sunday. I was reminded of an experience I had on internship when a lifelong Lutheran in their 70's had never heard of the Book of Concord. They had gone all that time without knowing that when we spoke about the Lutheran Confessions, we were talking about a book that is a collection of writings from the beginning of the Reformation. So, if you have never heard about it, don't feel bad, they hadn't either.

It's not your fault. It's my fault. And it's the fault of every pastor before me who has failed to teach you adequately about our history. Our context has changed, and this is especially true for St. Paul's, where not every person that considers this congregation "home" is someone who grew up in the Lutheran church. Some of you might be recovering Catholics, and it's not a topic they're quick to cover. Others come from the many Protestant churches that often don't put the same emphasis on the day. Even I had not really noticed that Reformation Day was special until sometime in high school. In fact, what I recognized first was our Lutheran fight song, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Today, I hope to give you a foundation of what Reformation Day is all about. But before we continue, please understand that as most introductions go, we're glossing over some of the details and simplifying the points.

We often say that the Reformation began in 1517 when Martin Luther "nailed" his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This is wrong for a few reasons, first, he didn't nail anything, he would have posted them with candle wax. But it's not as if people looked around and announced to the world that the Reformation had begun. The date is a placeholder, a sort of bookmark in history for us to point to as a beginning. And what it began was a time of great change in the church. At the time,

Christianity was broken into only two pieces, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and in most of Europe, the Catholic Church. Now like a lot of systems, over time the Catholic Church had become corrupt and lost its focus. For roughly 100 years before Martin Luther, groups and people had been arguing for change in the Catholic church, but it failed to go far. But when Martin Luther posted his 95 complaints and abuses regarding the church, a recent invention helped spark a fire that ripped through the church. You see, Luther had some help from a little thing called the printing press. His criticisms of the church became the stuff of tabloid news, spreading everywhere.

His main criticism was regarding the buying and selling of something called indulgences. In order to help finance St. Peter's basilica, the Catholic Church was selling a piece of paper that would shorten or end your time in purgatory... or so they claimed. "But what about our dead loved ones?!" You might say, "They didn't have a chance to buy an indulgence!" Well for 5 easy payments of \$19.99 you could get them out too! Just sign on the dotted line. For Luther, this was an atrocity. Over time, his criticisms were taken up by the masses, and a large part of the German nobility, and led to the formation of a group that called themselves the Protestants, those who were protesting against the abuses they saw around them.

It took Luther a little time to articulate fully what he thought was wrong about indulgences, but in scripture he eventually found the words. The whole point of God's sacrifice on the cross was that we are unable to save ourselves; it is through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we find our salvation. It was the righteousness of God, the saving work of God, it was a gift, it was grace. Nothing we could do would ever be good enough to "earn" our way into heaven, and no donation or piece of paper

was going to be enough to make that happen. That's the whole point of grace, it's a gift freely given without the person having earned it.

Here's a story to help illustrate the point. Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of the Nazi prison camp at Ravensbruck during WWII shares this story in her book *Tramp for the Lord*. She survived camp, but her sister did not. Years later she was traveling around the world sharing her story. In Germany, after another telling, she was greeted by several members of the audience who came forward. One man, who offered to shake her hand, was none other than one of the prison guards. She says *"I fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take his hand. My blood seemed to freeze. I knew I had to forgive if I wanted to receive God's forgiveness, still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart."* She raised her hand and when doing so she was filled with a swelling of genuine forgiveness for the man. *"I forgive you brother."* Saying later "I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then." Wow...

That story comes from a book study we're reading in Sunday school about the Acts of the Apostles. It's actually about Pentecost, a day intrinsically connected with Reformation Day. The reason we use red on this day is to signify the action of the Holy Spirit. We wear red on Pentecost too, and in that Pentecost story we see the activity of the Holy Spirit, always moving, always pushing. That's a key hallmark of the Reformation, it's not an event that happened once, years ago, in 1517. The church is ALWAYS reforming, always changing.

Reformation Day can be dangerous for us. It very easily becomes a day about bashing the Catholics who messed up, ignoring the many mistakes we have made too. But at its heart this day is one that celebrates the truth that God is ultimately the one who is in control. We show grace

and love to others because God has already shown it to us! The Holy Spirit blows through the church bringing us ever closer together, changing where we need to change, strengthening where we need it strengthened. That's why this day is important. We end today with a prayer that I turn to time and time again. I have ended more than a couple sermons with it, but it captures perfectly the message at the core of the Reformation, a belief that God can do anything. So here is a prayer written by Martin Luther: Let us pray,

“Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.”