

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Reformation Day - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

10/29/2023

### **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**

Good morning! Now, this sermon will be a little different, it will come in three parts, with a loose connection between them. Maybe, you'll notice it, maybe I'm overthinking things... But today is Reformation Sunday! That's right, one of the two times a year we put on red and sing our

Lutheran Fight Hymn, also known as *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. It's an important day of the year for Christianity, even if not everyone celebrates it. This day is a celebration and acknowledgement of the actions that saw abuses in the Catholic Church called out and addressed, all of which took place 500 years ago. We wear red like we do on Pentecost because we believe that this was an action that was guided by the Holy Spirit, pushing the Church on to new places.

Now, we say that the Reformation began in 1517, but if you went back in time to 1518 it's not like everyone would be running around talking about the Reformation that began the previous year. But we use that date because on October 31 in 1517 Martin Luther posted his famous 95 Theses on the chapel door at Wittenberg University in Germany. These 95 points were a mix of theological statements, complaints, and abuses that Luther saw in the Catholic Church. At the time Luther was an Augustinian monk who was teaching at the school. Now, with a little help from this new thing called the printing press, his words spread across Europe, igniting a group of fellow protestors, which is where we get the name Protestant.

One of the chief complaints was the sale of something called indulgences. In an effort to raise funds for the many building projects in Rome, the church had sent out "salesmen" to offer faithful people the chance to "buy" their way out of purgatory. "But wait! Were you worried about your dead loved ones? For just a small additional fee you can secure their salvation too!" The most famous of these salesmen was a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel, and his now famous saying was "*As soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs.*"<sup>1</sup> Now I must

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<sup>1</sup> Ganss, Henry George (1912). "Johann Tetzel". In Herbermann, Charles (ed.). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company. pp. 539–541.

say in defense of any recovering Catholics in our midst, this was an extreme exaggeration of the official stance of the Catholic Church, but it DID happen. This is what frustrated Luther and his contemporaries, and while Luther was a lot of things, he was most certainly not one to keep his mouth shut. His criticism eventually led to his excommunication, which still stands, regardless of appeals to Pope Francis as recently as 2020. This excommunication led to the formation of what we call the Lutheran church, something Luther never intended to create.

Now, while we can get a little “go team!” about the Reformation, a friend once reminded me that it is also a day of grief and mourning. It marks a split in God’s Church, one that still stands. It remains a glaring reminder of our failure to see each other with the full dignity and respect that we are due. You could say it’s a sin.

Sin is our age old foe. Never far from the reality of life, and it seems that this week that evil has seemed closer than ever. As we grieve for the deaths in the Middle East we are once again forced to come to grips with the horrible reality of more gun violence in our own country. All told 18 people were killed, along with another 13 injured. I wish I had answers or explanations. I don’t. But I can call on each and every one of you to do whatever you can to make sure it doesn’t happen again. If you’re like me and you see this problem as a gun issue, call for stricter regulations. If you think this is a mental health issue, push for better care for those who are suffering. Most importantly, speak up. Reach out to your loved ones, let them know you care, that violence is never the answer.

At the heart of the Reformation was the belief that the Holy Spirit was active in the Church, pushing us to new places, calling on us to make faithful changes. We see a core belief articulated in our second reading from

Romans. “*For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*”<sup>2</sup> In these words we see reflected the belief that nothing a person could ever do is enough to save us from our own sin. But! Because of the grace of God, we don’t need to “work” at our own salvation, Jesus Christ has already secured it! That is the Good News! This means that we don’t need to worry about any rat-race to “get in.”

We are set free! For what? Well I’m glad you asked. God’s grace sets us free to care for one another. It sets us free to look around us and see what needs our help. It sets us free from any self-centered fear and anxiety for our own salvation and instead turns our focus outward into the world that God so lovingly created. Grace means we are free to love one another completely. It means we no longer need to live in fear and desperation. It means sharing. It means living fully into the promises of God and the life that was always intended for us. That’s why we often say that the Reformation never finished. It’s about ALWAYS reforming. God’s people called together, saved by Jesus Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, sent out into the world to show forth that same love. Isn’t that just fantastic? Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:28 NRSV