

Reformation Day
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
October 25, 2020

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
Please pray with me – may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is an important day in the church. It is Reformation Sunday. It is not a day that we “celebrate” – rather, it is a day that we “observe” -- one that we “remember.” And give honor to. Every year. So much of what I say today may be familiar to you as we take a look back on this important time in history.

We are mindful of the leaders of the Christian Church in the 1500’s who questioned and wondered and debated and prayed and waited and stretched and groaned and disagreed and co-labored and lived into the re-shaping and re-forming of the Church.

What is often termed “Reformation Day” was October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic Augustinian brother, Brother Martin, nailed 95 Theses, that is 95 statements, to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenburg. This was a common practice by which one announced that they wanted to be in conversation about the items listed. It could be compared to a post on Facebook where other folks can chime in. This singular action led to a decades-long – and some would say a centuries-long – and others would say an ongoing – conversation about what it means to be the Church of Christ.

Luther’s ideas were not revolutionary. They had been spoken before by others in the Christian Church, but the early 1500’s were a perfect time – political leaders were in flux, the intertwining of the Church with the secular leaders was unmistakable, there was a social shift from a centralized government to a more localized focus, urban areas were growing as society began a shift away from feudal life, local leaders had more influence and then there was this new technology that made it easier for news to get out more quickly and accurately – the printing press. A perfect storm, if you will, a storm by which the Church was significantly re-formed for all time and a time that marked the beginning of a reformation that continues today. A time of the Church persistently pushing forward into new areas and new ministries in spite of the understandable pull to get back to the way things had always been before. The Church moving forward because of the leading of the Holy Spirit – the guiding of the Holy Spirit, the inspiring of the Holy Spirit. The Church was being re-formed. And the Christian Church continues to be reformed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The text for our consideration today is from Isaiah 43:18-19 –

“Do not remember the former things nor dwell on the things of old. I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth – do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to the people of God who were a defeated and conquered people – they had been marched into exile some 600 miles away from their home, all that was familiar, all that was comfortable, all that was “home” continued only in their memories. But God promised restoration time after time, through prophet after prophet and Isaiah nailed it – watch! it’s happening! open your eyes! see it!

In the same way, we have read and studied and learned and told the story of God’s redemption of God’s people from Egypt as recorded in the Book of Exodus. We saw that God provided for and shaped and formed God’s people as they traveled through the wilderness for 40 years – as long as it takes. And God was persistently present with them – a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

In the same way that God was present with the Hebrews coming out of Egypt, the people of Judah living in exile in a foreign land, with Brother Martin who was certain that there was a different way to be Christ’s Church on earth – a way based upon grace and mercy and love – so we, too, as we seek out the way to be Christ’s Church in Lakeland, FL in the wealthiest country in the history of the world in these times of pandemic and national discord and strife – we too seek signs of the presence of God among us as the Holy Spirit shapes us and forms us. And, as we are not gathering for in-person worship and fellowship – out of loving care for one another – in these times, it may be more difficult to see and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Like Brother Martin, we use old ways and new ways. We use the old ways of telephone calls with one another, maybe a greeting card or a brief parking lot conversation on a trip to the grocery store – while maintaining safe physical distance, of course. But there are also new ways for us just as the printing press was new for Brother Martin. These new ways are available to us because of technology – the internet, the digital age, the computer and tablet and iPad, our smart phones. Facebook and Instagram and email and the list goes on and on. Now, I realize that many of us are unfamiliar with these tools and we might resist them because they seem too complicated. I urge you to remember that at the time of the printing press, the everyday church member could take advantage of this written material only after they learned to read. Reformation does not exist without changes and modifications and transformations. Reformation is not status quo. It is not back to “normal,” back to the way things were in February before all this started. Reformation means that we are part of being the Church for the sake of the world.

My friends, the Reformation Day that we observe today is but one step in God’s continual work in the Church of Christ to bear the love of Christ into the world that needs this so. And, we here at Grace are part of this reforming action of the Spirit in Christ’s Church. The Spirit that speaks of the grace and mercy and love of God in Christ for the sake of the world. May we join into this reforming mission of God.

So here is good news, my friends – as we struggle with and wonder about how it is that we are being reformed – this reforming is empowered and led and inspired by the Holy Spirit, this person of the Trinity that we call the Lord and Giver of Life. This one is giving life to us right here and right now.

The Message Bible puts it this way:

*“Forget about what’s happened;
don’t keep going over old history.
Be alert, be present. I’m doing something brand-new.
It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?
There it is! I’m making a road through the desert,
rivers in the badlands.”*

Yes, there are wildernesses and badlands and deserts. Yet, in the midst of this God is doing a new and reforming thing. And by the power of the Holy Spirit through the waters of our baptisms and by the grace of God we are called to be a part of it!

Thanks be to God! Amen.