

October 29, 2017

**Grace to Reform**  
2 Timothy 3:15-17

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The story started when, at least, according to legend, a German Monk posted 95 grievances with the church's practice of selling indulgences, tokens that would take a chunk of time off your stay in purgatory before you got into Heaven, on the door of the Cathedral in Wittenburg. Thanks to the invention of the Printing Press, the idea that salvation could be attained through faith in Christ alone sparked a wildfire that spread across Europe. This Tuesday will mark 500 years since the reformation began.

In those 500 years, the church has divided few more times, resulting in a world where today there are an estimated 33,000 denominations of Christianity worldwide.

Ironically, the Reformation embodies exactly why we need Reformation in the first place: because every good thing, no matter how pure, no matter how innocent or innocuous, will be corrupted by us.

This is the truth that every reformer knew, and that we, as Christians in the twenty-first century who seek to be disciples, would do well to remember: nothing is so good that our sin cannot get in its way.

I believe that this is a timely message for this Reformation Sunday, because Beth and I spent the last week in Belfast, a city that exemplifies the violence implicit in the Reformation. At last count, the city remains dotted with more than 250 paramilitary murals. And so we *need* to get this right because for the next few minutes, the screen up there is going to show what it looks like when we get this wrong.

**The sin of reformation is pride.** It didn't take long for reformers to take violent action against those they disagreed with. It happened almost immediately. It turns out, two people can read the same passage and come to different understandings of its meaning. I did Grad School at a Baptist Seminary and when given the opportunity to preach in chapel, I chose There are not two people in this room who agree on absolutely everything. As theologian James KA Smith, reminds us, we are not merely brains on sticks. What we know, and what we believe, is shaped by our loves, our experiences, and our desires. Spend enough time talking about a subject, and you will come to see that at some point, you agree to disagree. And even on Reformation Sunday, that's OK, because Reformation isn't about purity of doctrine or dogma.

Reformation is about hearing God speak through the words of Scripture and letting those words guide you at the same time as they cut you to the core.

That's what the author of Hebrews meant when they wrote, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." And that's what Paul meant when he wrote to Timothy in the passage we read this morning.

His advice to Timothy to start with this caution. "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Andras Tamas was one of the last prisoners of World War Two to be released. Captured by Soviet troops in 1944, his captors mistook his Hungarian language for gibberish and he was placed in a psychiatric hospital where he spent the next 53 years, until a doctor recognized his language and organized his release. Tamas had not seen his reflection in half a century and spent his first hours as a free person examining his aged features in a mirror as if for the first time. It's not as hard as you might think to forget who you are.

As individuals and as a community that labels itself Presbyterian, we are inheritors of the Reformation that were defined by an unquenchable thirst to explore the word of God. We are the descendants of men and women, some of whom literally gave their lives to ensure that you and I would have the right, the privilege and the opportunity to read the Bible in our own language. Today there are more than one hundred translations of the Bible available in modern English, from the grammatically complex to the purely poetic. So take your pick! How many of us have more than one bible on the shelf at home? Yet a 2014 study found that only 1 in 10 regular church attenders in Canada open their Bible at least once per week. For heirs of the Reformation, this should make us uncomfortable because it faces us with one of three possibilities: 1) you simply don't consider yourself reformed or Presbyterian; 2) the Bible has nothing to offer you because you've either figured it out or you just know better; or 3) it's hard to put disciplines in your life and you don't want to. But here's the good news. You can start today. If you don't have a Bible, I would love to give you one. If you want a Bible reading plan, I would love to give you one. "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

On Reformation Sunday, we do well to heed Paul's advice to Timothy. Because now, more than ever, I believe that the scriptures aren't done with us. In a culture where the church flails like a bird that fell into the deep end of a swimming pool, Reformation beckons.

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

God's word wants to speak to us today. But here's the crucial distinction: Paul's advice to Timothy contextually reminds us that the word of God is useful **when it is applied to us. OUR teaching; OUR reproof; OUR correction and OUR training.** That's not the way the Bible has been used largely over the last five centuries though. The doctrines, the dogmas, the truths that define denominational distinctives were all created to give us a sense of identity over and above some other group. They weren't affecting us, they were there to give us a sense of identity over and against someone else. I'd tell you what the Bible said with absolute certainty so that I could tell you all the ways that you were wrong, all the reasons that God was on my side and part of my tribe. That kind of thinking points the Bible in the wrong direction. It's not a weapon. It's a tool we use to cut away all the parts of ourselves that don't love God with our full heart, full soul, full mind, and full strength – and that don't love our neighbor as our self.

Thomas Linacre was king's physician to Henry's 7 and 8 of England. Late in his life, Linacre studied to be a priest, and was given a copy of the Gospels to read for the first time. Linacre corresponded that he was both amazed and troubled by what he had read. "Either these are not the Gospels," he said, "or we are not Christians."

The challenge of Reformation is to be at once reformed, but always reforming according to the word of God. And this is supposed to be hard. A mentor used to tell me that if you read the Bible and don't regularly find parts that you disagree with, you aren't reading the Bible. You're reading into it. If the Bible doesn't push you to a place where you are uncomfortable

Certainty is the great enemy of Reformation. Certainty says I have nothing to learn, no space to grow and God has nothing new to teach me. Here's the deep irony: the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. We read the Bible and let the Bible reform us because that's what it means to be a person of faith – to be open to the possibility that God isn't done with us yet.

But more than that certainty is the great enemy of the church in the twenty-first century. Paul concluded his advice to Timothy with a gentle reminder of the real reason that we're that there reformed, and always reforming according to the word of God is "so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." It makes us useful in the work that we have to do.

That's why Reformation is so important after five hundred years. Because by being reformed and always reforming is the only way that the church can present a Gospel divorced from the absolute certainty that this generation rejects outright. Absolute certainty is a non-starter for this generation and moreso for the one coming up behind it, because from the time we were in diapers, the only people who are absolutely certain of something were usually trying to sell us something. We will not be sold. But we are lonely, and if you show me a life lived in thoughtful intentional and authentic reformation, I can join you in that journey.

To be a church that grows in faith and witness, to reach the next generation as disciples who fulfill Jesus' great commission, Reformation invites us to die to our certainty and become a people of the journey. And, even as I say that, I say it fully aware of how scary it can be to plunge into the ocean of faith that we've inherited. But this is the call of discipleship: pick up your cross and follow Jesus. Step out of the boat, not sure whether you are going to sink or float, and there, find life in the fullest. There let the church find life.

There, find the Grace to reform.