

Sermon for October 29, 2016

Reformation Sunday

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Amen

As you know, today is Reformation Sunday, and as such, it's a day for remembering the past, coming to grips with the present, and living into the future.

Nearly 499 years ago, on October 31, 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany, Roman Catholic monk and theologian Dr. Martin Luther hammered his way into history by starting a conversation that ultimately led to what we now call the Protestant Reformation. We gather here today as beneficiaries of the changes which stemmed from the efforts of Dr. Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and a host of other fearless reformers. Today, we give thanks for the many ways in which the Church of Jesus Christ has been shaped and blessed by what happened long, long ago.

However, today is not just a day for remembering what Luther did five hundred years ago or what was wrong with the Catholic Church in medieval Europe. It's far more important, I think, that we take time today to reflect upon the current reformation of Christ's Church. You might find it interesting to know that all over Germany, in this decade of what they're calling the "Reformation Decade," there are posters of Martin Luther wearing headphones with a cord running down to an electronic device...symbolizing quite clearly that the church is facing the challenge of "plugging in" to the 21st century.

Like it or not, says Bob Dylan, Minnesota's winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, "The times, they are a changing." And if the church wishes to remain relevant, it must change, too...or it will die. Things are much different than when I became a pastor in 1984. People are busier these days. Worship habits have changed. Mainline Protestant churches are aging. The Millennial generation is questioning the whole business of how and why we do church. Not only that, technology has made the world a smaller place. Political gridlock and vitriol have soured our national spirit. Racism and sexism have resurfaced with a vengeance. In short, there's a lot that is extremely fluid these days. In and of themselves, these things are not necessarily good or bad...but they are the realities in which we and the Church find ourselves today.

Some religious observers have suggested that given the complexities of the modern age, the Church needs to have a gigantic rummage sale...a metaphorical rummage sale where Christ's Church would get rid of outdated practices, excess spending, useless trappings, and anything else which simply gathers dust. A few of these observers have noted that such massive rummage sales have actually happened every 500 years or so since the time of Christ. And, of course, as we've already noted, the last major rummage sale was the Protestant Reformation which began with Martin Luther almost 500 years ago. We're due, say these observers for another massive rummage sale. And indeed, they claim it's already in the wind.

And so, we are left wondering what the Church will look like in twenty years, in fifty years, or in another 499 years. While some Christians are fearful of the changes that are taking place, others are quietly confident that the Church of tomorrow will be just what's needed for the times ahead.

I tend to identify with the latter position. I am quite hopeful and encouraged about the future for Christ's Church. Call me a cock-eyed optimist if you will, but my hopes for the church of the future are colored by the words of Jeremiah: "Behold! The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

This morning, I'm also drawn to the words of a marvelous hymn written by Fred Pratt Green...a hymn that we'll be singing this morning during Holy Communion..."The Church of Christ in Every Age." It's a powerful and provocative hymn...no nonsense, straight-forward, challenging and supremely confident.

Just listen to the first stanza:

***The church of Christ, in every age beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.***

Once more:

***The church of Christ, in every age beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.***

I absolutely love that. The church of Christ, past, present and future, lives again and again, in the midst of a changing world, changing cultures, changing political structures, changing social landscapes. And yet, this church is not left to its own devices...it is being led by the Spirit of God. And this church in every age is called by the Spirit to examine its heritage and to speak its truth in the midst of turbulent times...and in so doing, like the Christ himself who rose from the dead, so shall Christ's Church continue to be resurrected...to rise from the dead...for the purpose of serving God's people, as the next four stanzas of the hymn suggest...to feed the hungry, to provide shelter for the homeless, to promote peace and justice for all, to speak a word of freedom to a captive world.

This past Thursday morning, Bishop Jon Anderson of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod was here at First Lutheran Church to engage with us in conversation under the broad theme of "Together in Ministry." Bishop Jon met first with several lay members from our church, then for a time with Intern Caitlin, and finally with me. His purpose was to see how we're doing...to learn from us anything that might be helpful in his work with congregations throughout the synod. And so we told him how God has been equipping First Lutheran to serve our community. We told him about our strengths, our gifts and our bright spots. We shared our hunches about the future of Christ's Church in our synod. We spoke about our successes as well as our "best mistakes" in attempting to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ here in St. Peter. All in all, we found ourselves speaking to Bishop Jon with a positive and passionate voice about the current state of Christ's church and our hopes for the future. What a gift it was to be able to have that conversation...and to be able to affirm in all kinds of ways who we are as a congregation and who we hope to become in the future.

And so, on this Reformation Sunday, let us embrace the fact that we are fully and deeply engaged in the ongoing reformation of Christ's Church...and yes, let us acknowledge that this reformation requires our full attention and all of our resources. But, let us celebrate and rejoice, knowing that it's worth the effort.

I don't have a crystal ball, and I don't know even remotely what the Church will look like decades or centuries from now. But I am convinced that God will give us what we need to face the uncertainties ahead. I am convinced that God's Spirit will lead us into God's preferred future. I am convinced that we of Christ's Church have every reason to be confident, hopeful and excited about the rummage sale that is just beginning.

For we are people of the new covenant. We have been saved by grace through faith. We trust that God is our refuge and our strength. We know that Jesus Christ is the truth. And we believe that the truth has made us free – yesterday, today and always.

Amen