

The Good News of the Reformation

Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2023
Pioneer Presbyterian Church
Reverend Jerry R. O'Neill

Reformation Sunday is always the last Sunday in October, marking the occasion in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door in (V) Wittenberg, Germany. Thus began the protestant movement in the Church to which a generation later John Calvin, a French lawyer contributed much to help crystallize Reformed Church thinking and establish the Presbyterian Church. Together with Calvin's theological writings, the work of the Scottish minister John Knox, and the clarity of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Presbyterian Church, with its strong Word and Sacrament ministry and its government, stressing the active, representational leadership of both ministers and church members was formed. Today there are more than 75 million Presbyterians serving the Church of Jesus Christ here on Northwest Coast of Oregon, across the States, and around the Globe.

The history of the reformation and the formation of protestant denominations are certainly subjects worthy of celebration and further study. We all would do well to acquaint or reacquaint ourselves with the confessional writings of the reformation. Just recently here at Pioneer we ordained Deacon Butch Brenaman. In that service we didn't test Butch on his knowledge of the Reformation and Presbyterian church history, but among the questions we did ask him after we heard him reaffirm his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior, were several questions about receiving and adopting for his personal life of faith and service, the confessional writings of the Reformed Church as the truth of our salvation and the call to discipleship taught in the Holy Scriptures.

These questions give us pause to consider, along with the Holy Scriptures, studying the confessions for edification and renewal, informing and enlivening our lives and the ministry of our congregations. Our lay pastor intern, Mark Dobney expressed at a recent Session meeting interest in helping head up in the New Year an effort to engage Deacons and Elders

and anyone else interested, in reading and discussing the confessional writings of the Reformed Church. Pastor Paul has mentioned a set of videos he's acquainted with that may be a good resource as well. Perhaps this joint celebration of the Reformation and our congregations' efforts this time of year to renew commitments and recruit new leaders, might just prompt us to consider gathering in 2024 not only for worship together on the fifth Sundays through the year but for joint study and the furthering of our fellowship?

Let's shift gears now, acknowledging that while the history and confessional writings of the reformation are indeed important for us to celebrate and lift up for further study, our desire today and my job as preacher today here this morning is to proclaim the good news of the reformation. Keep in mind that the protestant movement began and continues today not just as a protest against mislead and abusive faith and practices in the church, like, for example, the Roman Catholic church method of exploitation in the Middle Ages that got Martin Luther all riled

up, the selling of indulgences, a monetary payment of penalty, which supposedly, absolved one of past sins and/or released one from purgatory after death.

No, to be protestant was and continues to be not just to protest but profess, to be a proclamation, a testament, a witness to the truth revealed in the Word of God, in the Scriptures and person of Jesus Christ. The protestant church to which Pioneer and First Presbyterian belong, are those who give witness to the birthing, reforming, and renewing power of the Gospel, the good news of the mediating work of Jesus Christ on behalf of all God's people, whose life, death, and resurrection sets free each and every one to continue in God's word, all of us by the grace of God made alive and empowered to be one Church, the body of Christ at work for God in the world today.

This is the Protestant Church! This is the good news of the Reformation. Say some more about this Pastor? All right. Let's look at the verses from

Jeremiah 31. In this favorite passage for Reformation Sunday celebrations God is speaking to the people. But not only is God speaking, God is the one acting. The broken covenant from the past are forgotten and a new sacred relationship that does not depend on human initiative and accomplishment is underway. God is sovereign, writing life-giving words of love and grace on our hearts and into every cell of our mind and body.

This Jeremiah passage speaks to the heart of the reformation—God is at work establishing and sustaining a personal relationship with us from inside out. This new relationship is possible because the Lord forgives our violations of the 10 Commandments upon which the first covenant with God and humankind was established and now writes the way for life and love with God upon our hearts.

How might we better understand the significance of this new relationship of the heart God is establishing? Well, we have singers and musicians in our midst, right? (Show of hands) You know that singing and playing what

is written on the page can be an effective way to express the essence of a song. But it has been my experience and I'm quite sure yours as well, that by learning a song by heart we become the song.

By the grace of God, we as the Church are becoming God's song—God's love song for the world. Jesus Christ comes to dwell in our hearts, establishing a harmonious relationship with God, stirring us to sing a new song unto the Lord for all to hear, a song about the wonderful things God has done to restore us and all the world into a harmonious, joyous, life-giving relationship for eternity!

Paul's words in our passage from Romans chapter three, stand at the heart of the preaching of Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders. No human beings make themselves right with God through works of the law. As our own Pastor Paul read earlier, "we are brought into a right relationship with God through the divine activity centered in Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection."

God's amazing gift of grace has stirred up a new song for the people of God. The law is not the song but an aid to singing. The institutional church is not the song but an instrument for the song of God's people that regularly needs re-tuning. We, who continue in God's word and sacrament are the song. By God's grace, we are received through our baptism into the body of Christ, we have a place at the Communion table, and the Spirit of God is stirring us to sing from the heart Gods' song of a new covenant, God's song of a loving and eternal relationship that is given to us and all the world through faith in Jesus Christ.

The good news of the Reformation is that it is God, the Holy Spirit, and our Lord Jesus doing the work of reform and renewal. God's love and mercy are not dependent upon what we do or fail to do. This news has and continues to have profound implications for the church and its work in the world.

How is the church, realized in our hearts today, the church as the living presence of the risen Christ in and among us, through whom we experience a personal relationship with God and receive countless blessings from God; How is the church, freed from the bondage of sin and the false notion that we must earn, attain, or deserve the favor of God; How are we, the Church in 2023, to be strong in God's song today, to be a witness for the reformation sparked by God's grace and the transforming power of God's Word become flesh?

Might we begin, like the reformers, to take courage in the Word of God, a word that brings change for the good and sets us free to see and respond to the Spirit of Christ at work in this world, and in each of us? Might we consider where we see God at work in our congregations and the communities we serve where lives are being restored with hope in Christ toward wholeness? Might we avail ourselves to the possibilities God is offering us to work jointly in sharing the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ with others? Who among us today is the Spirit inviting into new

ministries? How can we help and encourage each other to respond to God's call?

Whatever else the Reformation will become, from Luther's posting of his 95 theses, to the church we know today, to the one Church, the one body of Christ in the World still in the making, the good news of the reformation is realized in lives set free by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and invited to be part of a grace-based community that spans the globe. The good news of the Reformation is the church where anyone who wants to be part of God's song will be welcome. The good news of the reformation is that, with God's help, we can learn how to be our best for God by humbly accepting and learning from our mistakes. As I heard someone say recently, "Jesus has shown us his scars, and we are starting to realize we don't have to hide ours."

The good news of the reformation is simply this: When by the grace of God we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe

again, to hope again, to live again. Through the fellowship of God's Word and Sacrament our two small congregations become the biggest space in the world. In that space we call the Church, the Holy Spirit fills us like a deep breath of fresh air and we sing a new song!

Alleluia and Amen!

Hymn # 379 in the blue hymnal—"My Hope is Built on Nothing Less"