

Reformation Sunday  
October 29, 2017  
Romans 3:19-28

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### **Reformation 500 Legacy**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is very good on this Reformation Sunday to hear five of our young people choosing to profess their faith and be confirmed in the Lutheran Church. This practice of nurturing our children in the mighty faith of Christ flows from the rivers of Lutheran tradition and the streams of communal practice. We are blessed indeed to witness the movement of these fine young people from the adolescence of faith into its bold public proclamation as full adult members of the Body of Christ. We commend them, honor them, and pledge our continuing support as they further deepen their faith and its practice in works of mercy, forgiveness (a favorite topic today), justice, peace, and reconciliation.

That these testimonies take place on this particular day is especially momentous. They now stand in a holy tradition that has abided for half a millennium. They are a sacred part of a commemoration of 500 years of Lutheran witness to the gospel. Nonetheless, Church anniversaries can be tricky occasions. An Orthodox theologian, John H. Erickson, notes:

What some of those touched by such events remember with joy, others remember with a sense of anguish and pain. Specific incidents which some may have completely forgotten, others take as the key for interpreting the entire occasion.

Certainly within the lifetimes of many present here, Reformation Sunday was a time to celebrate our 16<sup>th</sup> century separation from a corrupt Roman Church. It was filled with invective and judgment, and often far more concerned with vilifying than with understanding. We tended to identify ourselves "over against" Rome rather than with scriptural or theological integrity.

I pray that those days are past, and that we now take, well, a more Christian approach to this day. Yes, this momentous anniversary is an occasion for pride and joy, a touchstone moment to celebrate much that Martin Luther stood for and all that has been accomplished in his name and in the name of Lutheranism over the centuries. We may also dream about what still may be possible.

And yet, as we engage in conversation with many who were left behind in the wake of reforming zeal, we are learning that celebration may not be the best word for what we do today. You will note on the first page of the bulletin that the title is

“Commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Year of the Reformation.” The word “celebrating” has been avoided intentionally.

It reminds me of the recurring controversy over the confederate flag. Remembering is one thing. Celebrating is entirely another. We are, led by the Holy Spirit, becoming more circumspect about what we celebrate and how.

For many Roman Catholics, for example, the Reformation continues to be viewed only as “The Great Divorce.” Many are reticent to remember this anniversary at all, never mind seeing the Pope praying alongside leaders of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund, Sweden last October. This doesn’t even touch upon the legacies of pain being addressed among Anabaptists, Jews, Muslims, and other groups.

Those of you who have attended my New Member classes have a copy of a booklet by Dan Erlander I provide called “Baptized, We Live.” In chapter 3, “A Way of Teaching,” Erlander affirms three fundamental marks of Lutheranism. We are catholic (small “c”), evangelical, and reforming. That is, we are dedicated to the Church Universal (“catholic” means “universal”) and its healing. We are dedicated to the gospel (the “evangel”) of Jesus Christ. And we are committed to a continuing process of reforming the church, spurred by the core message of the gospel. That core was rediscovered by Martin Luther, guided by scripture. All are saved by grace.

And so, true to our better angels—our proper identity and heritage—we focus today on themes of remembrance and repentance, thanksgiving, and commitment to common witness. For the unity of Jesus Christ is essential. The body yearns to be restored to wholeness. Christ himself pleads repeatedly that we all become one in the gospel of John before us this morning—though a bit later than this chapter 8 on Christian freedom.

“Holy Father,” Jesus prays, “protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one...that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:11, 23)

Our commemoration today is not intended to thumb our noses at the other parts of the Body of Christ from which we are painfully separated, if for good reason. It is focused on lifting up the continuing reformation of the church, including towards the unity to which our Lord calls us.

Now, I don’t want to throw a wet rag on the joys of this day. I simply want to clarify the nature of our joy and, yes of celebration too. For we have much to celebrate as well, as do all Christian churches everywhere—not only Lutherans. Namely, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the love of God made manifest in our Lord, and the grace that instills faith in us, including our new confirmands this morning—Matthew Brian Bourkland, Antonia Biehn Daleke, Leah Catherine Knipstein, Lillian Ruth Rademacher, and Natalie Grace Skram Schacht.

Can I get an “Amen!”

As we celebrate Christ and commemorate the reforming spirit of the last half millennium, it is good that we remember the progress made towards restoring unity.

- Lutherans now enjoy full communion with six other denominations (Presbyterian, Episcopal, Reformed, Methodist, United Church of Christ, and Moravian). We are in promising conversations with others.
- We have been in dialogue with the Roman Church for 50 years, leading to many documents and rituals of agreement.
- We have abandoned the language of heresy and schism in reference to other denominations, whom we rightfully name sisters and brother in Christ.
- We have repudiated Luther’s later writings against the Jews, the Anabaptists, and Islam, repented of their consequences, and dedicated ourselves to understanding and reconciliation.
- In part through the work of this congregation, our national church recently repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, a legacy not specifically grounded in the Reformation but with which we have been complicit with regard to atrocities and abuses of native peoples.

Many of these developments were nearly unthinkable when I was participating in my own Christian nurture in the Confirmation classes at First English Lutheran Church in Richmond, Indiana fifty years ago. God is good (All the time). All the time (God is good). I experience true joy in naming these works of the Holy Spirit in the Church today. And I hope you do too.

We have come this far by faith, by grace, and by the subtle but powerful workings of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in our hearts. We rejoice in the gospel. And we commemorate with thanksgiving Luther’s profound rediscovery of the kernel of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there is much yet to accomplish in the work of reform. Our marking this day does not mean an end to the sacred calls of God to be about our Lord’s own reconciling ministry in the world. We continue such works well begun and look to still others that beckon.

I’d like to suggest one this morning. It will surprise no one. I echo the call today of many pastors, teachers, and laity in the church to foster on this anniversary an ongoing reformation that incorporates ecological justice in the full life, identity, and mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The call is to turn our reforming zeal towards the most pressing crisis that now faces all of humanity through an Eco-Reformation.

We are exhorted to reclaim scriptural calls to serve and keep the earth, enjoined by our theological roots to honor God the creator, and led by a theology of the cross to

seek justice in solidarity with the most vulnerable humans and now also with our most vulnerable fellow creatures.

I suppose you thought that you might be done with such references when you completed the series of worship services in September during the Season of Creation. But you were wrong. 😊 You have not heard the last of such things by a long shot. And yet, I hope that we can continue to engage this direction of reformation with humor and hope, along with seriousness and fervor. I have never considered myself plagued in any way by a tendency towards fire and brimstone. Heaven forbid! So I trust that we will go together into this good direction cradled by grace, confident in faith, and trusting in the Holy Spirit to lead us.

A blessed 500<sup>th</sup> to you all. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.