

“Semper Reformanda”
Reformation Sunday
Romans 3.19-28 and John 8.31-36

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week in the three-year-old classroom, discussions about Halloween were all the rage. I visited one morning while the children were gathered around their tables for snack. And they shared with me their plans for the big October 31st event.

I don't remember all of their costumes, but I do remember among them were a clown and Spiderman and Belle and a fairy princess and monarch butterfly. And yesterday morning, some of these same children and others in our Grace community gathered for a Halloween party here at church. Holidays have a special spirit when they arrive, don't they? We like to decorate and dress accordingly. We sing certain songs and observe special traditions.

While our children (and some adults too) get excited about the door-to-door collection of treats as the month of October concludes, in the Lutheran and more general protestant church, October 31st has other significance. We observe Reformation on the last Sunday of this month, but the actual date of commemoration, October 31, in the year 1517 was when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The 16th century church stood divided for a variety of reasons, language being one of them. Latin, the language of the church's worship wasn't the language of the people. Not only did the people attend worship in a language they didn't understand, folks were more concerned with tradition and hierarchy than the good news of Jesus Christ, the church convinced people they had to pay for the forgiveness of their sins, and only the scholars (a small portion of the population) could pick up the Bible and read it.

Martin Luther didn't want to start his own church; he didn't even want his followers to call themselves Lutherans. Lutheran was actually a name given by those who opposed Luther, a slang term, a name meant to be insulting.

Luther didn't want people to become anti-catholic. He was a devout Roman Catholic in his time. All Luther wanted was for all people to know that we are made right with God through God's grace, through Jesus Christ. He wanted the church's practices to change in order to best communicate this good news.

Luther wanted people to actually read the Bible, so he translated it into German. Luther wanted the people to worship, really worship, so he wrote hymns that taught basic tenants of the faith and designed the German Mass. Luther wanted the people to talk and think about faith and theology, so he wrote a lot, including the Small Catechism for lay people and families, and he wrote the Large Catechism for parish priests.

Now, Luther wasn't the sole reformer of the sixteenth century church, but he was able to get the movement started. Sometimes we Lutherans like to claim this Reformation heritage to ourselves, but others like John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Jan Hus, and Ignatius Loyola also brought reform to the church. On this festival celebration of the Reformation, it would serve us well to give thanks for the many reformers throughout history.

A phrase derived from a movement within the Dutch Reformed Church in the seventeenth century and later used by other Christian communities was, “Semper Reformanda,” always reforming. In its original use, it was the conviction that the church must continually re-examine itself as to maintain purity of doctrine and practice. Since then, it continues to be used in similar fashion, as a call to the church to realize that change and adaptation is a reality and indeed, a call of the church. Semper Reformanda – always reforming, always changing.

To impose this phrase on an event long before the phrase's origin, we might look at this morning's gospel discussion between Jesus and “the Jews that believed in him.”

Jesus proclaims: "If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

The Jews that had believed in him respond with a reflection that they are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. Jesus is presenting this group of people with an idea, a concept that is new to them. While they proclaim to have never been slaves, they seem to forget their people's experience in Egypt just before the Exodus and the exile years.

Still, what Jesus is suggesting is different for them. They claim freedom through their lineage and their law-abiding deeds. Jesus is proclaiming freedom through himself. *Semper Reformanda*, always reforming, always changing.

In our text from Romans this morning, Paul is reminding that community that post-Jesus life is different than before. He uses the words "now" and "then" to designate a change. "Now we know," our passage begins. "But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe."

"Then what becomes of boasting?" Paul continues, "It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed from the law."

Made right with God, good with God, through faith and not law-observance? For the pious law-abiders, Pharisees and commoners alike, Paul's statement here, this verse so central to the 16th Century Reformation movement, reflects a big change. We can't justify ourselves or free ourselves from sin. Christ accomplishes this. God's righteousness prevails. *Semper Reformanda*, even for the earliest of Judeo-Christian communities, always reforming.

Take for instance, our community here at Grace. In 1895, a school was started. In 1902, the church was chartered. Since then, the location of the Grace community has changed. Our building itself has undergone a variety of changes. The language in which we worship has changed. The denominational affiliation has changed. Even the make-up of our very community, what our leaders and laity look like, is different.

Sunday after Sunday, week after week, children and adults gather in this place for school and for church activities. It is no longer a given that we are all of German descent or speak the language. Some of us have been Lutherans since birth. Some of us have been at Grace since birth. Some of us come from Roman Catholic or other Protestant or even non-Christian backgrounds. It is no longer a given that all church families are school families or school families are church families. *Semper Reformanda*, always reforming, always changing.

We can find unity by our festivals, our traditions, our building, our struggles, or any of the components that make up our past. But in the midst of continued reformation, continued change, our strong and present center remains constant.

Regardless of time and context, even when some practices and traditions and communities change, Jesus Christ unifies us. In all we do, all decisions we make, Jesus needs to remain our center. Our foundation and unification as community comes from the cross when Jesus dies for our sins and the sins of the world, that we might be justified, made right with God, good with God through faith. Christ unites us in the promise of forgiveness and freedom from sin.

Semper Reformanda, always reforming. But more importantly, "*Semper Christus*," always Christ. Christ as our grace, our truth, our forgiveness and our freedom.

To the glory of God. Amen.

Panel:

The 16th century Church stood divided for a variety of reasons. And when a young monk named Martin Luther (among others) opened up the Bible and saw a message of good news, he experienced a stark contrast between the language of the Church and the language of Scripture. And so the Reformation began.

With red banners, Psalm 46, and a rousing chorus of *A Mighty Fortress*, we break from the prescribed lectionary and turn to a celebration of Reformation. While we recall the events of past centuries, we celebrate the present reality and the good news that Jesus has come that we might know the freedom, faith, and grace that comes from God alone.