

You Can't Buy What's Already Yours—Reformation Sunday

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[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)

[Romans 3:19-28](#)

[John 8:31-36](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

Maybe you've wondered—especially many of you life-long Lutherans who might be ashamed to admit it—maybe you've wondered: Why do we commemorate the Reformation on Halloween?

Reformation Sunday is always the Sunday on or before October 31st. Is it a coincidence? Did Martin Luther, that Augustinian Monk, that Roman Catholic parish priest in Wittenberg, Germany, that professor of the Old Testament as well, did he post his famous 95 arguments for debate on the Castle Church door arbitrarily on October 31st over 500 years ago?

The answer is no. It was not arbitrary. As you might know the word Halloween, and the holiday it has become, comes from the phrase All Hallows' Eve. And All Hallows' Eve is exactly what it says: the night before All Hallows' Day. Or, in modern English, All Saints Day.

November 1st in the Church's Calendar, then as now, is a commemoration of All Saints. And in Wittenberg, Germany, where Luther was a pastor and priest and monk and teacher, there happened to be a fantastic collection of Saint's Relics—chunks of Jesus' cross, pieces of Mary's veil, a tooth of St. Jerome, one twig from the burning bush of Moses, hundreds, actually, 10s of thousands of relics, in fact. And in the system up and running at that time in the Roman Church in the 1500s and before, one author writes:

Those who viewed these relics on the [Day of All Saints] and made the stipulated contributions might receive from the pope indulgences for the reduction of purgatory, either for themselves or others, to the extent of 1,902,202 years and 270 days.

We might bristle at this, as good Lutheran Protestants, or we might bristle at this just as modern people. But it was a system that, over hundreds of years, was instituted and blessed by the papacy as a way to reduce fear and guilt and sorrow among the faithful.

So, Martin Luther posted his arguments against this practice of buying forgiveness (on the day before this event, All Saints' Eve) because he worried it cheapened the whole thing, the whole process of being transformed by God's grace through forgiveness.

As a person, a Christian person, if Luther is to be famous for anything, it should not be for his faith (or his learning or his audacity to reform the church); Luther should be famous for his lack of faith. His absolute inability to believe that God could forgive him. He struggled with this immensely.

And this struggle: To know that we have fallen short, to believe somehow that we, and no one else, are the worst, this struggle to comprehend how God could still love the world—after Holocausts, and wars, and bloodshed and cruelty and the North American Slave trade on top... and all the rest of the unspeakable things we have done as individuals and as humanity. This was Luther's struggle, and that is what the Reformation is about.

Nowhere in Scripture could Luther or the dozens and dozens of other reformers who worked with him and supported him—nowhere could they find a basis for purchasing forgiveness out of a treasury of Jesus' and All the Saints' merits that the pope was chief steward of. But they did find things like we have heard in Paul's letter to the Romans today:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift...

Luther, just like Paul, believed you have to struggle with this. You have to dangle with your own mistakes before a lightbulb from God goes on. With God: you can't earn love; you can't earn freedom; you can't buy forgiveness. This is the ego-crushing cry, not just of Luther, but of All Saints, of nearly all expressions or iterations of Christ's Church.

We can debate about sin and what that is, we can debate about Jesus' death on the cross and what that means—but we cannot debate that whatever they are—God is not swayed to love us by our obedience. God's love is never failing, never beginning, never ending. And our only response is to trust that it is true.

Of course, it's silly to commemorate the Reformation. It is so old, it is so limiting. We are no longer just a German immigrant church, as we once were decades ago in the United States. Who cares about some old German, Roman Catholic punk that was shown the door by the pope and started his own movement? The Real Church is always a reforming, transforming Church. And the Church long before Luther had always been in this process of reforming and

transforming. Because declaring to the world: "With God you can't earn love; you can't earn freedom; you can't buy forgiveness." Declaring that will always tick people off, and it will always need to take new forms, new shapes, new words, new cultures.

In our brief Gospel lesson, you can hear how this upsets respectable people. The [Judeans] say to Jesus, "Ew!"

"We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

We are in bondage to sin, but we are indeed made free, made as a gift. In the spirit of Martin Luther, who was famously a loud-mouthed jerk—I will say the same thing today: Nothing—you or anyone has ever done—has impressed God.

Because God was already impressed.

God already went to the utmost depths of misery to meet all creation, to grab us, to free us, to embrace us. That is what "Jesus Christ" means, what the incarnation means. That is our message to the world as a Reforming/Transforming Church! It's all done—God's love never swayed nor swerved.

In fact, the prophet Jeremiah says that God is our spouse in an unbreakable vow of love.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant... It will not be like the covenant...that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

As God's free gift, free grace, constantly Reforms and Transforms the Church, so are we ourselves re-formed, so are our own communities called to transform, to change, **just as this community has undergone great change**. Two churches died, and one new community was Reformed. And it was all done, it was all suffered, we celebrate our new beginning all to do just one thing: To say together:

You can't earn the love, you can't buy the forgiveness, that through Christ, in Christ, we trust is already ours.

Amen.