

Refocusing Our Broken Traditions—Reformation Sunday

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[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)

[Psalm 46](#)

[Romans 3:19-28](#)

[John 8:31-36](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT. We were also pleased to welcome Grace & St. Peter's and St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Churches and their rector Rev. Bob Bergner to worship with us this Reformation Sunday as well.

Those of you who were with us last year for Reformation Sunday, might remember that I taught a little bit in my sermon then about why Reformation Sunday is observed so close to Halloween.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther, who was a monk and a professor of the Bible in a small-town university in Germany, had concerns about some traditions that had grown up in the church around the Sacrament of Penance, (which means around how the church forgave people). Halloween, of course, is All Hallow's Eve, originally. And All Hallows, is an old-fashioned English way of saying All Saints. November 1st is All Saints Day, a time when the Roman Catholic church commemorated the blessed dead, and all the Saints of the Church. And these traditions, that Luther had some questions about, were the most in the lime-light on All Saints Day. So, the night before, according to legend, he posted these so-called "95 theses" which were some questions he wanted to debate at his university.

I'm especially self-conscious this Reformation Sunday because our congregation has been recently blessed by a Reformation scholar, from Germany! So, I'll just say: lots of Protestants, whether Episcopalian or Lutheran or whoever, now love to say that the practices of the Roman Catholic church that Luther was wanting to debate were really, really bad. As a kid I remember being taught: that people then were buying the forgiveness of their sins with what were called "indulgences." **And that is just not true at all**—absolutely no one was buying forgiveness.

What was actually happening was way more boring and confusing and broken than some evil pope selling forgiveness to build a cathedral. Long ago, in the early, early Church, if you sinned, before a priest announced your forgiveness (which comes only from Christ, as we heard in our Gospel lesson today) before that, you had to show that you really felt bad for making the mistake. That you were "contrite!" So, I'm told (and if I'm wrong, I'll hear about it!), you were

asked to show you were contrite, by doing something or staying away from the community for a period of time.

After a while, over the centuries, this became less feasible. Especially for soldiers and others, that didn't have this kind of time, and who needed to be forgiven before they might suddenly die! So, the church "indulged" these folks with special cases. Hence, the term, indulgence. And, over time, the tradition got flipped—the announcement of Christ's forgiveness came first and then the showing-you-felt-bad came after.

Now, of course, in Luther's era, people were really big believers in the image of Hell. Thankfully, in our era, we have, I believe, a much healthier relationship with this. We, of course, as indeed our readings declare, we believe first and foremost in God's *forgiveness*. But, this is the medieval era, and they had Hell. So, once you confessed your sin and had the priest announce your forgiveness, you were safe from Hell. But... you haven't done your act of contrition yet! So, what if you died before you did it!

Well, that's where the idea of purgatory kinda comes in... sort of. (I hope that our Reformation scholar is not having a heart-attack!) So, in the afterlife, you had to sweat out all those yet-to-be-done acts of contrition. In Martin Luther's time, you could donate to the church as an indulgence, sure why not? Giving to the church is a sacrifice, a good thing. Is that buying forgiveness of your sins? No way.

But did regular, uneducated people know that then? No. Did you, very educated people now, know that? No, probably not. The phrase that comes to mind when I think of all this extra... policies and "stuff" that grew up around forgiveness... is: **This is broken**. How did the Gospel lesson this morning, when Jesus said: "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. So, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." How did it get so complicated?

Jesus says in so many words, "People are stuck making mistakes and I know that. That's why I'm here, to tell you it's ok, stop trying to do everything yourself." The point here, the point in Jeremiah and Romans too, is that people mess up. The story of the Old Testament, of the covenant, the agreement, the promises between God and God's people—this is a set of related stories of people messing up. Stories of broken people—everyone from Abraham to Moses to King David messed up. The Old Testament is stories also, of God forgiving them.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans just says the same thing: we can't do this on our own. We can't follow all the rules all the time. We want to be kind, and sweet, and generous—and we mess up. We end up being cranky, and mean and selfish. So, if God loves us, or forgives us, or stays our God, it's because God gives us a gift.

Martin Luther was very worried that the practice of indulgences made that gift unclear. And in the end the whole conflict of the Reformation—whether in England as the government swung back and forth from Catholic to Protestant to Puritan, or in Germany with Luther and his many followers—the whole conflict was *really* about asking: If people are so broken, then isn't the Church, the Tradition, broken then too?

And if it seems so glaringly broken, can't we try to shift things, change things, re-shape things, just a little, to refocus our attention on the love, on the gift, of God? And that's what the fight continues, really, to be about.

Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox believers, and Lutherans, and Episcopalians, and Baptists, and Evangelicals—we all agree that God's grace was made flesh in Christ. We all read from St. Paul's letter to the Romans and see there: "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift." What we fight about is what—and how much—we should change our in Traditions to match this truth as the years go by.

Luther was certainly not trying to make a new church, but to refocus the one and only Church. And here we are: children and inheritors of this tradition of refocus. It has never stopped. We still remain broken.

As a young person I was so outraged when I would see *people being people* in the church—petty or rude or exclusive. I'm not sure where I had gotten this impression: that the church community is supposed to be for saints only. The church community is *only* for broken and wounded people seeking healing... **Because that's all there is out there!** That's what it means to be human. And what it means to be God, we confess, is freely to welcome, forgive and heal all these people. As Christ's Church we are called to mirror, however dimly at times, this welcome.

It's true, here in this place, we are certainly at home with history and Traditions. We sing new songs, we sing very old songs. We celebrate Holy Baptism as a sign and gateway of God's forgiveness. And we celebrate Holy Communion as a mysterious encounter with Christ's presence.

But as reformation people, refocusing people, we are bold to say, that come what may, we are, first, grounded most securely, above all things, in God's freely given love. God's love that became visible to us in Christ. God's own self, that we call grace. And it is only this grace, that will, in the end, embrace and unite all God's children.

Amen.