

Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017

Confessing Our Heritage
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Today is an auspicious day on the continuum of church history. 500 years ago, on October 31, 1517, a young Augustinian monk named nailed his 95 theses (complaints) to the church in Wittenberg, Germany. His open act of critique unwittingly sparked a revolution which became known as the Protestant Reformation. Trinity Presbyterian, as well as other Presbyterian congregations, owes our existence to theologians such as Martin Luther and, later, John Calvin. Much of Luther's theology sought to correct many abuses of the church, such as the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were sold by the Catholic Church as a form of a "get out of hell" free card. Church goers could purchase indulgences to spring their loved ones out of Purgatory. Much of the money, however, from the sale of indulgences was pocketed by local princes and church leaders.

Luther was outraged at the economic and theological abuse of the church. He believed that grace could not be purchased, that the God in Jesus Christ, not the church, was the conduit of grace. Luther's theology, and the core principle of the, Reformation championed our total dependence on God. "Luther realized first and foremost that if *anything* about his salvation rested on his ability, character, or faith...he was lost."¹ Luther preached that the practices of earning your way into heaven--either by purchasing indulgences or performing good works—are always going to be insufficient. Thankfully, we don't need to worry about buying or working our way to salvation, because God's grace covers us in abundance.

500 years later, it's an ideal time for the church to reflect on its past and gaze towards the future. God's kingdom may be forever, but the Church has formed and reformed countless of times over the centuries. Today it is estimated that there are over 217 Christian denominations represented in the United States, even though the number of people who regularly attend church is on the decline. One lasting legacy of the Reformation has been the imperative for the church to continually reform itself. It's in our theological and ecclesial DNA to always seek to be a church that is more faithful, more pure, more in tune with the heart of God.

Presbyterians take particular pride on our processes and procedures that serve to help the church continually reform. Even though we sometimes have the tendency to get ideas bogged down in committee and task forces, the intent is clear: we try to listen to the Holy

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Spirit and respond as faithfully as we can. Anna Carter Florence remarks, “the Book of Order (the Presbyterian guidebook) is a gift and a help, but sometimes you just need to stop microfocusing and navel-gazing. Sometimes you need to step back and look at the big picture. Are we loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind here? Are we loving our neighbors as ourselves? If not . . . what needs to change?”²

Some time ago, I listened to an interview with chef Anthony Bourdain, who has written a new cookbook of recipes for the home cook. His cookbook is different in its approach to food, the antithesis to the glamorous, air-brushed entrees and desserts that most other cookbooks champion. Bourdain wrote this new collection of recipes with his nine-year-old daughter in mind, and he explains,

“It's unreasonable to expect someone, the first time they make hollandaise sauce, that they're going to get it right. It's a mentoring process where people try and fail and try and fail. And I think a lot of cookbooks idealize food and give you unreasonable expectations. And then you feel bad when you have a recipe for eggs Benedict that says, see hollandaise sauce, page 129. You go to hollandaise sauce, and it doesn't tell you that you're probably going to screw it up.”³

No one expects, when starting a reformation, or a new church, that they are going to screw it up. The Reformers didn't get everything right. Our ancestors made decisions, prayed prayers, discussed theology, and occasionally argued. We are the product of generations of Christians who did their best to try and figure out what following Jesus is all about. Learning from the experiences of our forebears not only provides insight to current conflicts, but also can embolden us to live faithful lives in the face of extreme challenges. Before I went to seminary, I hardly gave the Reformation a second thought, beyond a nod to Martin Luther and his 95 quibbles with the Catholic Church. A quick pound of the hammer and a new church was born. Or so I once believed.

² Luther Seminary. Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence (Kindle Locations 2799-2802). Luther Seminary.

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<http://www.npr.org/2016/10/25/499262788/at-daughters-insistence-bourdain-includes-ratatouille-recipe-in-appetites>

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But the course of the Protestant Church was not without challenges and failings. The Reformation was often violent, with clashes between Protestants and Protestants and Catholics frequently turning deadly. It is out of this crisis that many of the foundational documents of our faith, such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Scots Confession, were penned. I could go on. The point is that we Presbyterians here in Topeka, Kansas are heirs of a rich tradition. But more importantly, any problems that we are experiencing, both as an individual congregation and as a larger denomination, have likely been experienced in one form or another by Christians long ago. Just as All Saints' Day recalls the faithfulness and perseverance of the saints, Reformation Sunday points to God's reforming presence in the church.

John Calvin (another leader of the Reformation a few decades after Luther) himself remarked "God does not stretch forth his hand to us to lead each on his own course, but in order that we would assist others and advance their spiritual progress." A life of faith is meant to be lived in community and we are called to assist others with their spiritual progress. Sometimes this might look like serving with one another on a church committee, quietly doing the work of the church. Other times it might look like unloading 16 tons of mulch so that a playground can receive a much-needed makeover.

The Reformation left a rich history for us modern Christians, including a deep sacramental and liturgical theology. But we might have forgotten Calvin's insistence that Christians be social advocates for their neighbors. I don't know what the future of the church will be, but I am certain it is bound to how we treat the neighbor and stranger in our midst. Calvin was clearly taking cue from Jesus himself, who repeatedly, with his words and actions, brought communities to wholeness. Our Spiritual progress depends on our relationships, both within and outside the church. God is continually reforming us and reforming the church. Sometimes our ancestors were faithful, other times—not so much! As perfectly imperfect followers of Jesus, we are going to screw it up. But better to screw it up trying to be faithful than to never crack an egg for fear of ruining the hollandaise (so to speak). Regardless, God continues to lead us forward, always guiding us to greater, more joyful community. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Let us pray:

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Dear God, we are a church Reformed, and always Reforming. Please help us to bear in mind your greatest commandment, and may we always reform so that we may better serve and love our neighbor. Amen.