

Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ps. 46; Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Semper Reformanda

- The most important thing about this day is that it is the Lord's Day – the Day of Resurrection.
- The second most important thing about today is that it is Reformation Sunday. Today we mark that All Hallows' Eve 500 years ago, when a young monk named Martin Luther posted 95 theses (or debating points) on the door of the University Church in Wittenberg, Germany.
- The third most important thing about today is that a lot of us have just returned from Dogwood Acres, where we enjoyed a weekend retreat. If we have tracked in some North Florida mud and smell of s'mores and campfire smoke, please cut us some slack.

I think it's best to say that today we "commemorate," rather than "celebrate" the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation led to many, many good things, among them worship in the language of the people, a Sunday service of both word and sacrament, the promotion of ordinary Christians from spectators to participants in "liturgy," the "work of the people," and the re-discovery of the idea that every Christian has a *vocation* – a *calling* to serve God.

From the Reformation grew the radical notion that both boys and girls should be taught to read, that salvation comes by grace through faith, and that councils of the church can get things wrong, and are constantly subject to scrutiny and correction by the Word of the living God.

I could name many, many other good results of the Reformation, but we should be circumspect in our observance this day. It was never the intention of the 16th century reformers to divide the Church of Jesus Christ. They wanted to *reform* the Church according to Scripture and the practice of the early Christians. That those well-intentioned efforts toward reform resulted in a schism that endures to this day is what keeps us from celebrating the Protestant Reformation.

One day, Christians from north and south, east and west, from Geneva to Rome to Russia, from this corner of Adams and Park to the Co-Cathedral of St. Thomas More

on West Tennessee Street – ALL of us will sit at the one Table and share the one feast of our risen Lord.

Until that day arrives (and it will), we can commemorate, but not celebrate, the forces put in motion by Martin Luther’s nailing of his theses to that church door 500 years ago, come this Tuesday.

From the Reformation grew what we now call the “Reformed Tradition.” You and I stand in that tradition, some of us quite happily and some of us with no little discomfort.

Probably because I was born to it, I like being a Reformed Christian. I like sharing the company of people like John Calvin, John Witherspoon, Woodrow Wilson, and Reinhold Niebuhr. I like sitting at the feet of scholars like Walter Brueggemann and Martha Moore-Keish. Being a Reformed Christian keeps me on my toes.

More than anything else, however, to claim to stand in the Reformed Tradition is to admit that you do not have all the answers – that you belong to a church tradition that is *reformata et refomanda* – reformed and always being reformed – according to the Word of God. To be reformed is never to rest on your laurels or to fool yourself that you have arrived. To be reformed is to live in grace and gratitude to the Triune God who calls you by name, who chose you out of pure love – the God who knows full well that we are sinners, yet says to us, “I shall be your God and shall be my people.”

Our church constitution lists four (count ‘em four) themes of the Reformed Tradition. At the risk of turning this sermon into a lecture, I’d like to mention all four of them. (Don’t worry, this will not be as lengthy as a typical sermon by John Calvin or even Martin Luther. Both could go on for hours.)

Here’s the first theme of the Reformed Tradition: **The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation.**

“Choice” is a popular word in today’s culture. Reformed Christians believe human beings do have choices to make, but underlying all our choices is the choice God has made to be in relationship with us. We call that relationship “election.” Election is not to privilege, but to service. Service to God and neighbor arises out of gratitude that before we could love God back, God first loved us.

The second mark of the Reformed tradition is a **“Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God.”**

You could call that “concern for order” a strength. You could also call it troublesome obsession. We do have rules and structures by which we hold each other accountable. Most of the time they help; sometimes they hinder.

A lot of those rules and structures go right back to John Calvin himself. What can you expect from a guy who went to law school before he became a preacher?

The third theme of the Reformed Tradition is **“A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks the proper use of the gifts of God’s creation.”**

When Pam McVety addressed the City Commission last Wednesday, she stood as scientist, but also a member of First Presbyterian Church. She joined scores of other citizens in asking the Commission to set as its goal 100% renewable energy by the year 2035. Pam could speak with scientific authority because she has the data. She could speak with moral authority because she belongs to a congregation that has taken seriously God’s call to be good stewards of creation.

It’s not enough to worship in a building that “shuns ostentation,” as this one certainly does. We have to be a people who shun the notion that climate change is a hoax, who refuse to close our eyes to the harm carbon emissions are doing to our poorest neighbors, who put their money where their faith is, and not the other way around.

“A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks the proper use of the gifts of God’s creation.” -- What an old-fashioned idea! What a relevant idea for the living of these days!

The fourth theme of the Reformed Tradition is this:

“The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.”

“Well, preacher,” you say, “Now you’ve left off preachin’ and commenced to meddlin’. Don’t blame me. Blame the tradition.

The tradition says, left to our own devices, we human beings quickly lose sight of who is worthy of our highest allegiance. We make idols and bow down to worship them – idols with names like “greed,” “money,” “nation,” and “tribe.”

We forget we are called to love our neighbors, and instead we deny their humanity. We enslave whole peoples, haul them across the oceans in ships, force them to labor in misery, and even after their supposed emancipation, we act as though their children’s lives don’t matter.

We build checks and balances into our Constitution, and then elect leaders who heap scorn upon judges who perform their constitutional duty.

We let our fear of “the other” overrule both our hearts and our heads, and we become mindless followers of twittering tyrants.

That’s what happens when we forget our **“human tendency to idolatry and tyranny.”** That’s why we Christian need to examine our own behavior while at the same time, we seek justice in the world. We cannot serve God if we ignore the world God loves.

- Election to service
- Concern for good order
- Faithful stewardship
- Modesty about our own goodness and a healthy critique of people and institutions that constantly attempt to put themselves in place of God

These are hallmarks of the Reformed Tradition that has its roots in the Protestant Reformation. I could name more, but that would be bragging, and bragging is very unreformed.

May God continue to reform God’s church until all the saints are at rest and the whole creation rejoices.