

Happy Reformation day! As you probably know by now, I am a fan of explaining the colors we have in the Church. We highlight the importance of this festival in the Church by dusting off the red paraments, or cloths on the pulpit, lectern, and altar. The only time you'll see red like this on a regular Sunday is Pentecost. We really pull out the red highlighter for this occasion. We know Reformation day is important, but what is the Reformation all about?

This day in the Church year we commemorate October 31st, 1517 wherein a professor at the University of Wittenberg named Martin Luther posted 95 Theses on the chapel doors in Wittenberg. This was the medieval equivalent of putting a poster on a public bulletin board. Luther was wanting to start a public conversation about the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, specifically, the sale of indulgences.

If good works were the spiritual currency of the medieval church, indulgences were essentially a note saying that others' good works were credited to your account, or to the account of one of your loved ones—alive or dead. If helping a grandma cross the street was worth one good work point, the Church in Rome claimed to have an unlimited stash of good work points just waiting to be credited to your account. Indulgences could be earned through acts of piety and devotion, but at the time they could also be earned by purchasing them with money.

It was against this abuse and others that Luther wrote his 95 Theses or arguments and nailed them on the chapel doors. It was this event that would kick off a chain reaction that would result in Luther being kicked out of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church forming.

What are we to make of this event? What are we to celebrate on Reformation day? *Is the Reformation about bashing other Christians?* If you read any biography of Luther, even if you read his own works, you can't avoid it. The Roman Catholics are painted as the bad guys. They're the antagonists to Luther's story.

From our Gospel text: **“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”** If Luther is the one speaking those freeing, truthful words of Jesus, is the Reformation about shaming those opponents of Jesus who doubt it?

This is the awkward part, right? Every year we trod out this story of Martin Luther, you think of the Roman Catholics in your life. You have neighbors who are Roman Catholics. You have coworkers who are. You might even have family members who are Roman Catholics—people you love very much: spouse,

children, parents, grandparents. This is the elephant in the room every last Sunday in October.

Imagine a fictional reporter whose only job is to do coverage of protests. I would imagine that if you sat down with this imaginary reporter, she could tell you volumes about what the protestors were against: being against cloth face masks, being against police brutality, being against climate change, or being against discrimination. How often is the only tie that binds protestors together a mutual hatred of the thing they're protesting? In other words, they can tell you what they're against, but they don't know what they're for.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we Lutherans are part of a broader category called Protestants. Do you see the word protest in there? Protestants are often identified with what they disagree with. Us protestants can give you an earful about what the Roman Catholic Church does wrong. You and I could sit down on Zoom and I could lay it all out for you. But bashing Roman Catholics is simply not the point of Reformation Day.

I will be referencing this letter "A Letter of Consolation to All who Suffer Persecution Because of God's Word, Addressed to Harmut von Cronberg." This letter was written in 1522, only five years after Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the chapel door. Harmut von Cronberg was an early adopter of the Lutheran set of beliefs, and he suffered for it. When the government published an edict declaring Luther an outlaw, Harmut renounced an annual government stipend of \$30,000 in today's money. Would you give that up just to be part of this church?

Luther writes to encourage Harmut who faced coming persecution. Harmut would end up spending about 20 years, a third of his life, in exile for his Lutheran faith. Suffer is what Harmut did.

Jesus says, "**You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.**" Luther praises Harmut for clinging to the Gospel, the word of truth: "However, this noble word naturally brings with it a burning hunger and unquenchable thirst that can never be filled. Even though many thousands of people believe in it, we would still desire that no person would want for it. Such thirst is ever active and knows no rest, but impels us to speak, as David states in Psalm 116:10, "I believe, therefore I speak." And (as St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 4:13), "We have the same spirit of faith, therefore, we, too, speak," until we include and incorporate everyone with us and make them one communion with us, wherever this is possible."

3. The Reformation isn't about bashing other Christians. It isn't about alienating or demonizing other Christians. But rather, loving them, proclaiming the Gospel to them, and inviting them to freedom and the peace we have in the truth of Jesus Christ.

I was in Wittenberg in the summer of 2013. I saw the chapel doors upon which Luther nailed His Theses. I saw the house in which he spent most of his

adult life. I saw the pulpit from which he preached. It was four years before the *Lutherjahr* which is German for Luther year, namely, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Funny how they called it the Luther year.

Is the Reformation about idolizing Luther? Luther is in many ways a larger than life figure. Many movies have been made about him. It's the story of a tortured soul rising to the top and overcoming his persecutors and inner demons. Luther is a folk hero in Germany and other places for his contributions to the German language by standardizing German through his Bible translations. He is a hero for standing up to the powers that be, saying no to the Pope and paving the way for Germany to be its own country. Is the Reformation about rallying around Luther as a semi-divine figure?

Even Luther disagrees, in his letter to Harmut he writes, “This is attested by the fact that you do not believe because of men but because of the word itself. There are many who believe because of me. However, only those are true Christians who would adhere to the word even if they heard that I myself (God forbid) had denied and forsaken it. These are the ones who are not affected by whatever base, horrible, and shameful things they hear about me or about our associates, for they believe not in Luther but in Christ himself. The word has them, and they have the word. They pay no heed to Luther, whether he be a knave or a saint. God can speak through Balaam as well as Isaiah, through Caiaphas as well as through Peter yes, even through a [donkey]. I subscribe to their opinion. I myself do not know Luther either, nor do I want to know him, nor do I preach anything about him, but about Christ. The devil may take him [Luther] if he is able to, but if he keeps his hands off Christ, all is well with us.”

Did you notice how I drew the analogy between Christ and Luther earlier in the sermon? Did it make you uncomfortable? It should have because Luther is Luther, and Jesus is Jesus. Luther isn't Jesus. The name Lutheran doesn't mean we worship Luther. We worship Jesus. He sets us free from sin and death. We know about this through the teachings of God's Word, namely, the Bible. 2. The Reformation isn't about idolizing Luther. How many people, Germans especially, know Luther but don't know Jesus as their Lord and Savior?

1. The Reformation is about the Truth setting you free. Three years ago, our church body promoted the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with the following tagline: “It's still all about Jesus!” And hey, I think that's still a pretty good line! Because it is all about Jesus!

Sin's lies made Luther a slave. The lie was this: that Jesus did most of the work, and you just had to do the rest. Jesus got you the shiny car, but you had to purchase the gas. The insurance covered the big stuff, but you were on the line for the incidentals.

This lie drove Luther to despair. He beat himself up. He wore out the priest to whom he confessed his sins. He sat out in the cold to punish himself. But the Truth set him free. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ set Luther free. In fact, Martin Luther wasn't always Martin Luther. His original name was Martin Luder. He changed his name to Luther which comes from the Greek word "free."

The freeing Gospel is that Jesus Christ came to save you. He lived a perfect life for you, never sinning once, never giving into the devil's lies. He took on your sins as He carried the cross to Golgotha, and He forgave them through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

This freeing gift is a free gift. You don't have to earn it; you simply have to receive it. The money's in the bank, you simply have to believe it. Secure in Christ, you don't have to worry about life after death. He will take you to be with Him. You don't have to worry about a guilty conscience, in Christ, your sins are as white as snow. In Christ, you're a son or daughter of God, and you're not getting kicked out of the house.

The Reformation isn't about telling other Christians, "You're doing it wrong!" It isn't about setting up a shrine to a 16th century German. **THE REFORMATION IS ABOUT THE TRUTH OF CHRIST'S GOSPEL FREEING SINNERS. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** Amen!