

Happy Reformation Day! We'll be doing a three-week sermon series titled "Scripture Illuminated." We'll be taking a piece of religious art and talk about how it ties into the themes and readings of the Sunday. In a pre-literate world, art was the educator of the masses. Much of the religious art of stained-glass windows and paintings and portraits sought to teach the common people Biblical truth.

On this Reformation Day, we see that Reformation era art was no exception. This painting is an altarpiece, which means it was made to be set in front of the altar of a church. Lucas Cranach the elder painted this to be set on the altar at the City Church in Wittenberg, the congregation where Martin Luther preached.

This painting was finished in 1547, in time for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the Chapel door. The nailing of the 95 Theses, or arguments kicked off a series of events that would lead to the formation of what is now known as the Lutheran Church and would result in the returning of the Gospel to the Church. For that we can be thankful.

Four years ago, we celebrated Reformation 500, we pulled out all the stops to belt out "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Pilgrims flocked to Wittenberg. We got our 15 minutes of fame as the news media covered it on television, newspaper and online headlines. What about Reformation 30? Hooray Gospel! Hooray Luther! Right?

October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1547, Reformation 30 was a dark time for the Reformation. Martin Luther died the previous year, and the Church was left to figure out what it meant to be Lutheran without Luther. In May of 1547, Wittenberg surrendered to Charles V's Imperial forces which meant by Reformation 30, Wittenberg was occupied by Roman Catholics and was forced to reverse many of the reforms made by Luther and his colleagues. By Reformation 30 it wasn't certain that there would be a Reformation 50.

As we celebrate Reformation Day today, what can we learn from this painting about the nature of who God is and what the Bible teaches? Our theme: **THE REFORMATION REPRESENTS THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS.**

First, I. The Reformation re presents the Sacraments. Re presents. That is, makes them a gift again. We see three panels in this piece of art, and these depict the three sacraments in the Church. First, on the left we see baptism, the recovery of Biblical teachings on baptism made baptism a gift again.

Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson, "**The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**" Sons remain forever, and sons are free. Likewise, the Bible teaches, "**for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.**" In Christ Jesus you are a son or daughter of God, and this happens through baptism.

The Church in Luther's day taught that your baptism could break. If you sinned, the promises of baptism were broken and you had to rely on other forms of grace such as the Lord's Supper or Private Confession to continue on in the faith. But that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that baptism is an adoption ceremony wherein we are made children of God. Yes, to be certain, not all who are baptized will be saved. You can reject saving faith after baptism, but the emphasis of the Bible is that baptism is God's gift to you, a washing of regeneration and rebirth that covers all your sins.

Next in the central panel we see the Lord's Supper. For this painting we'll reflect on words that I will speak later in the service, **"Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."** Drink of it all of you, this cup is shed for the forgiveness of sins, and drink this often.

The Church in Luther's day taught that the Lord's Supper was a re-sacrificing of Christ on the cross and it was an act that man did for God. Thus, an entire system sprung up of having communion services even if nobody but the priest was around. People would pay priests to say masses for their deceased loved ones in hopes of securing a place for their soul in heaven. Even to this day you can do that in certain churches.

But the Reformation re-presented the Lord's Supper. It made it a gift again. In the Lord's Supper Jesus is working for you to present what was once for all delivered and accomplished on the cross to you and for you. In it Christ's body and blood are truly present for the forgiveness of your sins, and your faith is fed.

Finally, on the right panel we see confession and absolution. Some Lutherans consider confession and absolution to be the third sacrament. Our Bible passage for this picture is Matthew 16:19 Jesus says to Peter, **"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."** In this picture we see the pastor forgiving the sins of the man on the left and binding the sins of the man on the right who is walking away upset.

In Luther's day, confession and absolution was a requirement in order for sins to be forgiven. Any unconfessed serious sins could send you to hell, and any unconfessed light sins could at least make you pay for them in the afterlife in a supposed place called purgatory.

Luther was a tortured soul. With those ground rules set, he would confess often daily, and for as long as six hours on a single occasion. It got to the point that his pastor, Dr. Staupitz, told him to come back with actual sins to confess. But Luther had a valid point, King David writes, **"Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults."** Who can recall every single sin?

But the Reformation made confession and absolution a blessing again. We retain this practice, we even did it at the beginning of the service, and the Lutheran Church even retains the rite of private confession and absolution, but it's not so that you can earn your forgiveness through your good memory. It is a gift for you to be reassured with the promise that Christ has forgiven you, even of that particular sin that is bothering you.

I. The Reformation re presents the Sacraments. Secondly, II. The Reformation represents the People. You might not notice this, but various Reformers make their way into the paintings on the Wittenberg altarpiece. Philip Melanchthon, one of Luther's right-hand men, is the one conducting the baptism. Luther is the one receiving the cup in the central panel, and Johannes Bugenhagen. Bugenhagen was the pastor at the church and is buried there to this day.

We might wonder, why put people they knew in the picture? Yeah, maybe somebody paid Lucas Cranach to paint the picture and Cranach wanted to appease him, but I think more than that is going on here. In the picture of the Last Supper, we see Jesus in a German setting with castles in the background. The men around the table look more German than Jewish. Why make Jesus white? Why have the disciples at the table wear German clothing?

Cranach was not a historian trying to recreate exactly what the Last Supper would have looked like. That's not the point. In an Asian church you may find a painting of a Jesus with Asian features. In an African church you might find a dark-skinned Jesus. To be certain, there is a historical Jesus who was born in the middle east and probably looked Jewish. But in making Jesus look like the locals, it is a statement that “[Jesus] **had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.**” Jesus is your Lord. Jesus understands you.

The Reformation brought the truths of the Gospel into the homes and the hearts of the people. Luther's contribution was his translation of the Bible into German so that people could read it. His Small Catechism was a bite-sized instructional manual that people could memorize. The Reformation represents the People, so it's no surprise that we see Jesus surrounded by Germans in Cranach's painting of the Last Supper. And so it is that even today, you join Jesus at the table. We partake of Christ's body and blood even as Jesus Christ presides over the meal.

Finally, III. The Reformation re-presents Jesus! That is, it makes Jesus present again. Now, for those of you familiar with this piece of art, you realize that I haven't shown you the full thing. There is a fourth panel below these three. In this fourth panel, we see the power of the preached word. It's an illustration of Luther preaching Christ crucified to the people.

Paul writes in our Epistle lesson: **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,”** This message of good news changed the lives of the hearers in the Reformation era. It changed the life of Luther. It changed the lives of many people across the globe: that you are saved apart from having to appease God through your works. Christ has already done it all for you.

The foundation to all these changes in the Reformation era was the preached Word. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Confession and Absolution are all grounded on the pure teaching and preaching of the Bible. The altarpiece itself shows us this. Literally if you cut off the painting of Luther preaching Christ crucified, the entire altarpiece would topple over. The Reformation re-presented Jesus, that is, it made the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus a present reality to the people of the day.

At Reformation 30, things were dark. Luther was dead. But the Reformation wasn’t about Luther. Wittenberg surrendered to hostile forces, but the changes they wanted to make to the worship life of the Lutherans ultimately didn’t stick. Why? Because the Reformation re-presented Jesus. It presented Jesus to the people and His Word of Promise was lodged into their hearts and homes. Even despite the emperor’s best efforts, the pure teaching of the Gospel was not stamped out.

So today, let us celebrate. Not a person in history, nor that we have a certain name on our church sign. Rather, let us celebrate because **THE REFORMATION REPRESENTS THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS.** Wherever the Word of God is cherished, wherever the Sacraments are celebrated rightly, there is the Church. And where the Church is, we can see ourselves in the painting, celebrating a baptism, sitting at the Lord’s Table, or relishing in sins forgiven. May the Lord keep watch on His church that at Reformation 504, we live to celebrate many more Reformation days to come. Amen!