

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Reformation Sunday  
October 29, 2017

**Reformation: Before Us and Beyond Us**

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Marty was a good man, and a devout Christian,  
but for many years he had been stranded on a desert island.

One day, a nearby ship saw the smoke from Marty's fire on the beach,  
and dispatched a boat to rescue him.

Marty rejoiced and thanked God for sending someone to rescue him.

The sailors asked Marty how he had survived for so many years.

He told them of his exploits for food and fresh water,  
and how he was able to build a fine house to live in.

In fact, Marty said,

"You can see my home from here. It's up there on the ridge."

They looked up and saw three buildings.

They inquired about the building next to Marty's house  
and he replied,

"That's my church - I go there to worship on Sundays."

But what about the third building, they asked.

Marty replied with a note of scorn and superiority,

"Oh, that's where I *used* to go to church."

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This great little story gets at our very human proclivity  
to make ourselves right by making someone else wrong.

Now, we would never want to reduce the whole history of the Protestant Reformation  
to this sinful tendency,

but we Protestants do need to approach our history and our self-understanding  
with a degree of humility

and in full awareness that after all our protestations and reform,

we, like our forebears, still have a broken a human institution,

since we are no less human than they were,

and no less sinful.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in just a few days,

many in the Protestant traditions are saying

it really should be more of a commemoration than a full celebration,

since we have some reasonable ambivalence

about the history and legacy,  
and certainly some of the rancorous spirit and sometimes violent methods,  
of the Reformation.

Also, as church historian Louis Weeks reminds us,  
no single person or event, or even a series of singular events,  
caused the Protestant Reformation.  
It was rather a gradual development  
with some moments of high drama,  
but mostly just years, and then decades, and then centuries  
of faithful wrestling with the Word of God in real world contexts.

**The Reformation happened slowly over time,  
and is still happening.**

The particular time that we are using to mark the anniversary  
is the traditional date of October 31, 1517,  
when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 Theses  
onto the doors of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

It was the Late Middle Ages,  
which was an age with some striking similarities to our own:  
cynicism about the church and other institutions was high,  
participation in church was low,  
and knowledge of the scriptures was almost non-existent  
among Christian populations.

Martin Luther saw what he believed to be the root of the problem,  
and he stepped out in faith and took a stand.

Luther's particular complaint in these 95 theses  
was the practice of paying indulgences.  
It is often assumed that with there being 95 of them,  
Luther's theses addressed the wide range of Reformation theology.  
Not the case.  
All 95 of the theses are about indulgences.

The practice of paying indulgences  
was a system set up in which clergy sold certificates  
by which the Pope claimed to guarantee  
a reduction in the length of punishment for sins  
committed by the purchasers themselves  
or by their loved ones now in purgatory.  
Purgatory was believed to be a sort of intermediate state after physical death  
where those who were ultimately destined for heaven  
must go to be purified.  
Depending on how sinful a person had been,  
and whether he made up for those sins by doing good deeds during this life,  
he or she would stay in purgatory for a longer or shorter time.

This time could be shortened, or even completely eliminated,  
said the Pope and his preachers,  
by purchasing an indulgence.  
Have you committed adultery? Defrauded your neighbor? Told a terrible lie?  
Just fork over the hefty sum for one of these handy indulgence certificates  
and you will not spend one extra minute in purgatory for it.  
Or you may spare your loved ones' souls from any additional time.

And so the indulgence preachers went about proclaiming,  
"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs"  
As you might imagine,  
these preacher got a healthy cut of the indulgence fee, as well.

In Luther's day,  
Pope Leo X had authorized the granting of indulgences for almost any sin  
as a means of paying for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome:  
you know the one,  
the massive dome and all the statues of past popes,  
where the pope resides,  
and where St. Peter is said to be buried.

So it's not hard to see why people might have grown cynical  
about this system of religion.

Luther's 95 theses basically boiled down to saying  
that indulgences are a sinful distortion of the gospel of Christ,  
that the Pope has no power to release these souls from purgatory anyway,  
and that the system provides no incentive for people to actually repent from their sins.

If the Pope does have power to release anyone from Purgatory, Luther asked,  
why in the name of love does he not abolish Purgatory  
by letting everyone out?

If for the sake of miserable money he released uncounted souls,  
why should he not for the sake of most holy love just empty the place,  
and let people give their money to help the poor of their community?

For asking these questions  
and for undermining a very profitable system  
Martin Luther was eventually tried for heresy  
and finally excommunicated from the Catholic church in 1521.

"Here I stand," Luther famously said,  
"I can do no other."

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As Luther's story reminds us, the Reformation of the church  
has always involved taking a risk.  
We learn the same from the stories of John Calvin, John Knox, and others.

But before Luther, Calvin, and Knox, there was Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus.

And we have heard today of Paul's risky work in his letter to the Thessalonians.  
First Thessalonians is Paul's first letter to a church that we know of,  
and it is the oldest New Testament manuscript still in existence.  
It was not so much Re-formation as First-formation,  
but it was still about the same task of  
**forming a church  
that reflects the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Paul poured out his own heart and soul for the sake of the gospel,  
and for the church,  
all the while suffering shameful mistreatment and great opposition.  
He and his fellow missionaries, Silvanus and Timothy,  
"proclaimed the gospel of Christ  
in an open market of competing truth claims and competitive orators  
that vied for attention and allegiance,"  
professing his deep love and care for the members of the church  
at Thessalonica.<sup>1</sup>

But Paul's days ended before he saw the full fruit of his labor,  
and certainly without his knowing that his letters would be canonized as holy writ.

And before Paul, there was Moses,  
who is extolled in the last chapter of Deuteronomy.

In a sort of eulogy of Israel's great leader,  
we are reminded that  
even though Moses was able to wield miraculous divine power against Pharaoh,  
and in the face of desert threats of starvation and thirst,  
and even though he was God's prophet like none before or after him in Israel —  
**Moses himself never made it into the Promised Land.**

God's work of salvation went beyond Moses himself.

He risked his life,  
gave up his personal peace,  
and even sometimes he risked his faith,  
to be the servant of God's deliverance,  
doing as he believed God was commanding him.

But even Moses only glimpsed the promised land from afar;  
his hopeful vision remained only a hopeful vision to the end of his days.

And if we mention Moses and Paul,  
we must mention the many women of faith who also risked much:  
Miriam, Deborah, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene,  
the women Paul names as his co-workers in the gospel,  
to note just a few,  
who took great risks for the well-being of God's people.

**Reformation Sunday calls us to remember that,  
from the beginning of God's story with God's people,  
God has been doing a new thing,  
but we do not always perceive it,  
and we might not always receive the full benefit of God's work  
in our lifetime.**

"God's salvation story is just that: God's!

Our time is merely a chapter in a narrative we did not conceive nor create.

Our limited vision calls us to humility and prayer as we seek to discern:

What is essential and what is [peripheral]?

What must change and what must remain if we are to be faithful?

If indeed reformation never ends,

what must die for God's resurrection power to reign?"<sup>2</sup>

**The Reformation of God's church is a story that only God can continue.  
A story that began before us,  
before our seeing and hearing and knowing,  
and will continue beyond us,  
beyond our striving, and planning, and perceiving.**

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But the Reformation is still very much also about *us*.

Moses, and Paul,

and Deborah, Miriam, Mary, and Prisca and Junia,

were all trying to do what biblical religion call us all to do:

**build up a community of faith that knows and loves God  
and that knows and loves the neighbor.**

If you believe in the God of the Bible,

then you have to believe that God calls you into just such a community,

and that means that you, too, are called to be caught up

in the great work of Reforming the life of God's people,

for there will always be such work to do.

There is no such thing as Christianity

apart from the struggle to be a Christian community.

**Baptism is initiation not into a solitary life,  
but into the whole people of God.**

Eugene Peterson may have said it best,

in his book *Leap Over a Wall*, that we're studying on Tuesday mornings.

"...when we get serious about the Christian life

we eventually end up in a place and among people decidedly uncongenial  
to what we had expected.

That place and people is often called a church.

**It's hard to get over the disappointment that God,  
having made an exception in my case,  
doesn't call nice people to repentance."**

"Every time I move to a new community," says Peterson,  
"I find a church close by and join it —  
committing myself to worship and work with that company of God's people.

He confesses,

**"I've never been anything other than disappointed:**  
every one turns out to be biblical, through and through:  
murmurers, complainers, the faithless, the inconstant,  
those plagued with doubt and riddled with sin,  
boring moralizers, glamorous secularizes.

Every once in a while  
a shaft of blazing beauty seems to break out of nowhere  
and illuminate these companies,  
and then I see what my sin-dulled eyes had missed:  
word of God-shaped, Holy Spirit-created  
lives of sacrificial humility,  
incredible courage, heroic virtue, hoy praise, joyful suffering,  
constant prayer, persevering obedience."<sup>3</sup>

It is to just such a community of Christ,  
a broken vessel, and very imperfect institution, a very human community,  
to which we are called  
to re-commit ourselves  
as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

God is working through you, Fourth Presbyterian Church, and through me,  
and beyond us in churches across our land,  
to transform "the church we used to go to"  
into "the church God wants us to be."

Welcome to the risky journey of the Christian life.

<sup>1</sup> Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 211

<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield, Reformation Sunday 2017, in "Looking into the Lectionary" in *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, p 100-101; quoting Gerard Manly Hopkins