

Sermon 10-29-2107
Reformation 500
by
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Today, we celebrate 500 years of reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses, or statements for debate, to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The next day was All Saints' Day, and there would be plenty of worshippers who would see them. But this was not, at this point, putting out a All Points Bulletin.

Wittenberg only held between 2 and 3 thousand people at the time. The Holy Roman Empire, which Wittenberg was a part of, held 16 million. But this one little spark started a fire that burned throughout Germany, and then to other parts of Europe, then across seas and oceans, and has not stopped since.

Among approximately 2.4 billion Christians in the world, 900 million claim the Protestant heritage that Luther started. And we, as those who carry Luther's name on our sign, our letterhead, and our congregational association, should be the most celebratory. But what are we celebrating?

Some say that the Reformation wrecked the unity of the church, and led to all these offshoots, where

anyone with a Bible and an idea can create something new. It doesn't help us to deny that those things have happened. Jesus did pray that his disciples would be one. Unfortunately, sin has crept into that. As LCMC's Service Coordinator, Mark Vander Tuig, likes to say, "As long as we gather sinners, there will be trouble in church." But we also need to remember that division started before Luther. In 1054, the Eastern Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic church excommunicated each other, in what is known as the Great Schism. Because of sin, there has always been controversy. So why celebrate this one? Why celebrate this time?

Because this time has brought us the freedom of the Gospel. Luther is famous for looking for a gracious God, even when he was devoted to God in the monastery. He would bounce off the walls in agony through the night, knowing that he had not done enough to fulfill God's Law. He was scrupulous in his examination of himself and his motives, and the Scripture led him to that examination. But when he found the Gospel, the weight was lifted from his shoulders. When he discovered that the righteousness of God was not a club to beat sinners over the head with, and actually the gift that God gives to us through faith in Jesus Christ, that was freedom for him. In fact, that freedom affected him so much that he

changed his name. He grew up as Martin Ludder. He went through all of this as Martin Ludder. But in the early days of the Reformation, he started signing letters differently. He would sign as Friar Martin *Eleutheros*. He liked the way that it kind of rhymed with his name. *Eleutheros* is a Greek word he discovered in his work. It means "the liberated one". So when we say we are Lutheran, we say that we are people of freedom. We are the ones who are called to liberate people from their burdens, by the proclamation of the word of life found in the cross of Christ.

But too often, the church has not done that. We have fallen into easily placing *more* burdens on the shoulders of those Christ loves. For those who have our understanding of the Gospel, we sure enjoy using the Law on others. We have set up unspoken behavioral and socioeconomic rules for people joining our communities. We have attempted to make laws that are binding on people of faith binding on everyone. We have convinced our culture and ourselves that being Christian means behaving properly, and that's it. But when the Law comes to *us*, we hem and haw, duck and dodge. We have lost Luther's grieved conscience. We make excuses for ourselves. We compare our sins to the sins of others. And we have often gotten just a taste enough of grace

that we have innoculated ourselves against guilt over our sin, both outside and inside of the church. We don't think about it. We don't contemplate it. We distract ourselves from it, with entertainment and wealth. We say things like "I'm basically a good person." No Lutheran would ever say that! If we are to be freed, there needs to be something that we need to be freed from.

So, for us gathered here today, on this day of Reformation, let us reform our own hearts. Let us commit to God's full Word, Law and Gospel. Not in a legalist way, demanding things from others that we don't require of ourselves. Not in a libertine way, saying nothing really matters because of Christ. Let's do the whole thing together, to ourselves, for ourselves. It starts with claiming our own sin. The specific ways that we have hurt our families, our congregations, our communities, ourselves, and God himself. We need to feel the weight of our sins. We need to feel the consequences of our sins. We also need to feel the weight of the sins of others, even if we seemingly had nothing to do with them. We need to realize that we're really all in this boat together, this boat that has sunk to the bottom of the ocean, and has led to our death. We're as good as dead, because of our sin.

And yet, we are freed. We are liberated from our bondage to sin and death. As we have lain dead at the bottom of the ocean, in the deepest place possible, with no hope of human salvation, Jesus Christ enters our world. He reaches us, brings us out from the water, and breathes new life into us. His death has replaced our death. We have been freed from death. We have been freed from sin. We have been freed from focusing on ourselves. We have been freed to serve our neighbors. We are freed, and that's it! There's nothing more amazing! There's nothing more important! There's nothing you need to do for God. There are things you are called to for your neighbors. You are called to serve them. You are called to care for them. You are called to bring the Gospel to them. You are the tools in the hands of a good God who delights in nothing more than applying the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ to more people, over and over and over again, and that includes you.

That is what we celebrate when we celebrate the Reformation. We're not celebrating Luther. We're not celebrating separating ourselves from other Christians. We're not celebrating being better than others, especially when we're not. We're celebrating the freedom that we have been given in Christ Jesus, our liberation from sin, death, the world, and the devil. This freedom has brought about our salvation

for this life, and for the life to come. This freedom has been given to you, and is given so that all people may be freed from their sin. There is only one way to end this: Thanks be to God. AMEN.