

“But Now...”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian New Canaan – October 25, 2020

Please Read:
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

For several years now, I have preferred to *commemorate* rather than *celebrate* Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday is when we remember how Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517, posted his 95 theses on the Wittenburg Castle door for debate with Rome. While I am thankful for our heritage of being *a church reformed, always reforming*, it’s hard for me to celebrate the centuries of division and separation that can be traced back to the protests of the Protestant Reformation. Depending on how you count, there are now an estimated 45,000 denominations of Protestants in the world!^[1] This is hardly a year to celebrate division and separation, especially when we are experiencing both a pandemic of CV19 but also a pandemic of political polarization that seems to be threatening the very fabric of civil society and our most sacred institutions.

The good part of the reformation was a refocusing on what is central in the Christian faith. Battles cries then were *sola fide, Solus Christus, sola gratia, and soli Deo Gloria*. What’s missing? We’ll come back to that in a moment.

Some of you know that our family lived for six years in Zürich, Switzerland. I’m sure all of you have heard of the 16th century Reformation heroes Luther and Calvin, but how many of you have heard of Ulrich Zwingli, who served as pastor of the Grossmünster in Zürich?

What you probably don’t know, is that early in his ministry, while serving as the people’s priest at Zurich’s Grossmünster church, Zwingli fell ill with the bubonic plague. In the months linking 1519 and 1520, Zwingli struggled to shake the disease before finally recovering. What you need to know is that while it didn’t take *his* life, the plague killed between a quarter to half of the residents of Zurich!

For Zwingli, the threat of death deepened his trust in divine providence. He was deeply moved to see so much suffering, and so he composed what is known as the *Plague Song* (see insert). His words inspired so many they were adapted for inclusion in many 16th and 17th century hymnals.

Zwingli’s Plague Song is a hymn of lamentation but also renewal and a reminder that in times when we are experiencing how fragile our lives really are, there is an opportunity in every crisis to renew our trust in God’s goodness and pledge our lives in service to God’s love.

You see, the Reformation we remember today did not occur *despite* personal and communal tribulation. On the contrary, the most historically significant spiritual renewal in the past 500 years occurred *because* of the hard and desperate times people faced. The problem was that the *spiritual renewal* produced *social upheaval*, which I think went in the wrong direction. Zwingli died in a battle between Roman Catholics and Protestants. His

crushed helmet is in the city museum. We don't like to talk about the Wars of Religion, or the 30 years' war, but some argue those divisions between Catholics and protestants set the stage for WWI, setting the stage for WWII.

Which begs the question: What kind of reformation does God want us to experience because of what we are going through in our time? Phyllis Tickle was famous for her observation that every 500 years the church has a giant lawn sale, a rummage sale in which we trot out things that have accumulated—doctrines, traditions, and practices—and sort through them to see what should be kept and what should be discarded.

How would you answer the question about what is essential and what needs to be discarded in the church today? I am convinced that we need to dedicate our lives anew to social renewal that brings the love and justice of Jesus Christ into a reality for all people. Simply put, we don't need more "battle cries!" Too many in our world today are suffering because of a spirit of domination and division that leads to some form of violence, whether warfare, economic disparity, racial discrimination, gender bigotry, etc.

The pandemic is *terrifying*, but it can also be *clarifying*, bringing to light inequalities and injustices that have been growing for decades, but also the way forward to a better life and a fairer world.

Which brings us to our lectionary texts. Jesus says the truth will set you free. The apostle Paul says in Galatians 5:1, "For Freedom Christ has set you free." Freedom, I believe, is one of the most central issues of the gospel that we need to recover. Freedom to receive the truth that we are created and loved by God. Freedom to not worry about how God thinks of us, but to rest in the gospel that God freely chooses to love us. This freedom has two sides to it. One is that we are free from any guilt and shame because of the fact that we aren't perfect. How much energy, time and money do we all waste in making sure we look like we're successful people? That we're good people? That we deserve God's blessings?

Trying to be good is a form of slavery, isn't it! We work really, really hard to be successful and look like we have it all together. I love the line, "If at first, you don't succeed... we have a lot in common!"

Which brings us to our Romans text. I know that one of our esteemed members has climbed Mount Everest. Well, chapter three of Romans has been called the Mount Everest of biblical interpretation. It's challenging, but I submit to you that we all are slaves to the law, of trying to measure up, of trying to get it right, however, we've defined "right" to be. And Jesus has come to set us free from all of that, by declaring the truth that God loves us. That's the truth. God loves you. God does a happy dance over you. God delights in you. God smiles as a parent smiles with delight at their child...

And so, you are free from having to "measure up," of having to live up to some standard to be OK... There is nothing you can do or not do that is going to make God love you any more or any less! It's pure grace...

What Paul is saying here theologically gets worked out in a very practical way in chapter 15 when he challenges the Roman Christians to “Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God!” A grace-filled church is a welcoming church. There’s no judgment and no evaluation; no application form to prove you’re “one of us.”

See, that was the problem that Paul was describing from Romans, chapter one through to chapter three. There were the legalists and libertarians. Some insisted on practicing all of the laws and those who said there is no law. What Paul ends up saying is that you’re both wrong. More precisely, he wrote, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

But then comes the most dramatic two words in the whole letter of Romans, 3:21... “*But now...*” Did you catch that? *But now*, since the unjust execution and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Divine vindication of the Way of the Cross, of self-giving love, God is bringing people into the right relationship by a new means: simply by grace. Your job is to believe it, to trust, to put your faith in the truth that you are now “right with God.” Now Jews, Gentiles, women, and men, old and young, are all on equal footing, all equally loved and valued by God! And over the centuries we have been trying to expand our understanding and experience of this truth.

It’s amazing really. God’s people used to think that only Jews were God’s chosen, *but now* we realize that all are chosen by God. We used to think that white people somehow needed to help people of color to become civilized, *but now* we realize that God created all people in the image of God! We used to think that only Christians would be saved, *but now* we realize the truth that “God so loved the *world...*!” We used to think that only straight people were acceptable, *but now* we realize that our LGBTQ siblings are welcome as full members of the household of God! We used to think that it was the right doctrine that brought salvation, *but now* we realize the truth of the apostle Paul’s statement, “the only thing that matters is faith working through love!” And the metric of salvation is love for God, neighbors, and enemies!

And this brings us to the other dimension of freedom. We are set free *for* a new life of faith. The Greek here in this Romans text is deliciously ambiguous. It can be translated as either “faith *in* Christ” or “faith *of* Christ.” I think Paul is intentionally ambiguous. Here’s why. Putting our faith *in* Christ gives us the spiritual truth we need to constantly move toward the fullness of the freedom that God wants for us; to live guilt-free, shame-free; to live with confidence (with faith) that we are beloved, heirs of the King.

But this truth that we believe *in* Christ sets us free then to live with the faith *of* Christ. This means we live in the way of the Cross, the way of self-giving love, showing welcome and blessing to everyone, come what may.

The other part of this text is the word “righteousness” which in Greek is *dikaiois*. These words are also wonderfully ambiguous and can be translated as either righteousness or justice. When we live in a right relationship with God, we will live in just relationships with those around us, and we will be concerned with the lack of justice in our community.

In other words, there is no true relationship with God if there is no true relationship with the neighbor.

So, let's come back to my original question about what kind of reformation is needed today? In what areas of your life do you need to experience the truth of God's love for you so that you are truly free to show God's love in your life. And how do we as a congregation need to move into this truth of God's love for us so that we will be freer to show God's radical love and welcome others as Jesus Christ has welcomed us?

At the risk of oversimplification, I think we need to practice what we preach. I love the video series "Smarter Every Day." There's one about Byron Ferguson, who must be the world's greatest archers. In the video, his son gently tosses a six-inch wooden disk into the air. And Byron, using a longbow, nails it. A high-speed camera, replayed in slow motion, captures the arrow's impact nearly dead center on the disk.^[2] He then hits dead-on a two-and-a-half-inch plastic ball. And then a golf ball, then a *Life Saver candy*, and finally an *aspirin tablet*! You have to see it to believe it!

When the host asks how it is possible to shoot an arrow so accurately using a handmade longbow, especially when the target seems so small, Byron replies: "The center of an aspirin is exactly the same size as the center of a beach ball. Just always aim for the center."

Friends, brothers, and sisters, siblings in Christ: There are all kinds of distractions in these strange times, but now, let's practice aiming at the center of faith, the truth that in Jesus Christ we are set free from guilt and set free for love. This is the reformation we need. This is the reformation our world needs... And that is something to celebrate this Reformation Sunday!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

^[1] Referenced Thursday, October 22, 2020:

<https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/Christianity-is-fragmented-why/>

^[2] Referenced October 24, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Yp9SjCU5E>