



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Reformation Sunday: October 28, 2018

Sermon Title: "Reformation Written on our Hearts"

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Today we mark Reformation Sunday, which commemorates the 501st anniversary of the date a young scholar and monk named Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, or arguments, in support of the proposition that God gives grace and forgiveness freely. Grace need not be purchased or earned. What now seems obvious to us was not the norm in Luther's day. Religious authorities traveled from town-to-town offering something called an "Indulgence." Taken in the best possible light, a certificate of indulgence provided tangible assurance to its holder that time in purgatory would be reduced. It was supposed to be a means of comfort. But in practice, it was a fundraising tool which extracted money from the poor to construct massive cathedrals and finance religious wars. The practice had corrupted the Church's understanding of God's love and our salvation, and the Church's pastoral work of forgiveness and mercy.

Luther saw indulgences for what they really were – a human work that in practice caused only despair. When could you know that you had paid enough money, secured enough indulgences, or did enough good works to be assured of God's love? What hope could you possibly have that Jesus had made a place for you in the Kingdom of Heaven? Chasing after our own salvation is the religious equivalent of a hamster wheel – we run and run in a never-ending pursuit of God's love, and only succeed in tiring our bodies and exhausting our souls. And so a *reformation* was needed. The movement's name is noteworthy. This was not a "re-creation." Luther's goal was not to burn everything to the ground and start fresh. Reformation was about keeping that which was true, beneficial, and Biblical; eliminating that which was contrary to God's Word; and reorienting the Church from focusing on what *Christians* must do and instead taking comfort in what *Christ has done*.

I can offer you no better example of that than the sacraments themselves. In baptism, Christ claims us not because of our merits but because he loves us. He does not affirm that we have made ourselves perfect and holy. It is he who places his robe of righteousness over us and by his grace mercifully renders us forgiven and holy. It's especially noteworthy that we baptize infants who are incapable of offering good works or making some sort of public declaration or decision for Jesus Christ. They can do nothing but *receive* Christ's gift of grace. We adults find ourselves in the very same helpless, vulnerable position. We too are incapable of earning or meriting Christ's gifts in baptism.

Consider as well Holy Communion. Do we receive Christ's body and blood in the wheat and wine because we have somehow demonstrated a *perfect* understanding of how common earthly elements become the real presence of Jesus Christ? Do we receive forgiveness and mercy in Holy Communion because we are sinless, holy, and righteous? No, we come to

Christ's table as beggars, with nothing to offer. We come to the table as the spiritually sick and broken, in need of the healing medicine of God's forgiveness and love. And indeed that is what we receive. Christ pours himself out for us every week in Holy Communion just as he poured himself out for us on the cross. It is a gift, one we cannot merit or earn, but one that is freely, abundantly, and graciously given to us.

And so as "Reformation people," we are always clinging to this core conviction: salvation is not about what *we do* but what *Christ has done*. This notion was not an invention or innovation by Luther or his supporters, but a timeless truth that was revealed as the dust of human distortions and medieval innovations was brushed away and the light of Christ's love was able to shine clearly and purely once again. That is what all of us mark and celebrate and recommit ourselves to proclaiming on Reformation Sunday. This is the heart of who we *are* and what we *believe*.

The Bible lessons assigned to this day offer beautiful, life-giving glimpses into the heart of a God who loves us, forgives us, and treasures us even when we are at our most unlovable. I want to particularly draw your attention today to our Old Testament reading, from the prophet Jeremiah. It's only four verses, so please take your bulletin home and reread this short passage at home. Study it with your children. Post it on your fridge. Think about the remarkable promise it contains.

Jeremiah was a priest and prophet who wrote approximately 500 to 600 years prior to the birth of Jesus. His book is a heartbreaking chronicle of God's people turning their back on God. In his book, Jeremiah persistently calls the people of Judah to forsake sin and return to God. He pleads with them to repent – to turn around – and to remember God and the covenant God had made with them – a covenant in which God promised to care for them and the people promised to follow God.

But instead, the people and even their priests turned away. The outcome was predictable. Nations imploded. Society splintered. The poorest and most vulnerable were exploited. People were driven into exile and slavery. Hopelessness surrounded this broken people and despair flooded over them. Their sins and misdeeds and all of the consequences that flowed from them were laid plain for all to see.

But God's astonishing response to a faithless people is to be even *more* faithful. His reply to the house of Israel, as we heard in today's Old Testament lesson, was to make a new covenant - a promise - one overflowing with grace. Hear God's steadfast promise: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." God made this promise with no requirement or expectation of return. We might compare this promise of God to an *ancient love letter*, echoing both across *eternity* and from within the *very core of our being* – a love letter that appears and reappears with a word of assurance, acceptance, and affection when we most need it. Or we might think of this promise as holy seeds that God plants in us whether or not we are worthy ground. In God's time, these holy seeds bloom in us, they turn us, they transform us, and they stir us to share that beauty with others.

Maybe these images are too poetic, so let's get more personal. This new covenant written on your heart is what moved you to come here today. It's that nagging, gnawing feeling that your life without God is somehow incomplete, unfulfilled, and lacking in true meaning. That new covenant written on your heart is the jolt of awareness that fills you as you hear a choir singing here, or take in the beauty of our sanctuary or the beams of colored light pouring through our windows. That new covenant enables you to bask in beauty like that, and understand that it is revealing the presence of God, a God who loves you unconditionally and is drawing you closer and calling you into a deeper relationship, one in which you will finally feel like your true self – the person God made you to be. And that new covenant written on your heart is what enables you to feel empathy for the hurting and vulnerable. It's what moves you to abandon self-interest and self-preservation and instead be God's hands of mercy to an aching world.

This new covenant – this supreme gift of grace – is all of these things, but more than anything else, it is a person – Jesus Christ. The only reason the Reformation mattered in 1517 and the only reason it matters in 2018 is if it continues to drive us to Christ and his cross, for only there can we find *true* safety, peace, assurance, and hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.