

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
October 31, 2021
Reformation Sunday

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So today, sisters and brothers in Christ, today the Church commemorates what is known as the Reformation.

Yes, today, October 31st marks the day when an obscure 16th century monk by the name of Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany in the year 1517.

Now, these *95 Theses* were nothing more than a list of complaints, a list of grievances against the Church, a list of points Luther hoped could be debated.

The list included what Luther felt were abuses by the Pope and the medieval Roman Church.

The list included Luther's critique of purgatory, the place of limbo between heaven and hell for those who have died.

The list included Luther's critique of the power and authority of the Pope to forgive sins.

And most importantly, the list included Luther's critique of the sale of indulgences, which were pieces of paper signed by church officials, which individual Christians could purchase to buy one's forgiveness of sins.

And tradition has it that Luther took this list compiled on a piece of paper and tacked it to the door of a church, and by this simple action, Luther sparked the Reformation.

By simply posting a piece of paper, Luther sparked the greatest upheaval within the life of the church.

Why tack these *95 Theses* to the door of a church on October 31st?

Because it was the eve of All Saints' Day, November 1st, and Luther knew that Christians would be flocking to church the next day.

And the door of the church served as a sort of bulletin board for faculty and students of the university there in Wittenberg.

In other words, Luther knew that the *95 Theses* would get its due attention, and would hopefully create a debate among local church leaders.

Now, Friends, whether this story is true or not is debatable.

Scholars contend that this story is described only in the writing of Luther's colleague Philipp Melancthon, who was not an eyewitness to the event, who only arrived in Wittenberg in 1518.

And Melancthon only recounts this story years later, after Luther's death.

So this story may very well be fictional. But it does make for a great story.

PAUSE

But regardless of what may or may not be the truth with respect to the posting of the *95 Theses*, what is factual is that *95 Theses* originally written in Latin was subsequently translated into German, and then copied on the new-fangled invention known as the Gutenberg printing press, and then disseminated.

And this then set off a storm of conflict within the Church which has come to be known as the Reformation.

And everyday laypeople living at that time no doubt personally experienced those abuses within the church described by Luther in his *95 Theses*, but now those everyday laypeople had someone who was giving voice to their experiences, and Luther's words in the *95 Theses* galvanized the laity in opposition to the church authorities.

PAUSE

Now, this day, October 31st, is also known for another reason.

Today is Halloween.

It is the date in which children have traditionally dressed up to go Trick or Treating, even though local communities now have designated Trick or Treat Night often on a day other than October 31st.

Nonetheless, at the time of Halloween children go door to door seeking candy while dressed up in costumes.

Are Everly and Ashton getting dressed up? Are Isabella and Addison getting dressed up?

So, in addition to it being Reformation Day, today is also Halloween.

And if we didn't know, the word "Halloween" derives from the older name for All Saints' Eve, that being, All Hallows' Eve.

"Hallow" meaning "holy" or "sacred" or "saintly."

All Hallows' Eve evolved into term "Halloween."

And whereas All Saints' Day is all about the saints and angels in heaven, the night before, Halloween, the night before All Saints, has been understood as the playtime for ghouls and goblins.

So today is Reformation Day and it is also Halloween.

PAUSE

And if we were to draw a connection between the 16 century church movement known as the Reformation AND the secular holiday known as Halloween, what would it be?

What similarity might we make between the Reformation and Halloween?

For me, the connection comes down to one word: change.

Reformation is itself a big word that simply means change.

To reform means to change for the better. To reform is to stop ill-behavior. To reform is to go through a process of renewal.

But most simply put, to reform is to change.

So, yes the Reformation was about Martin Luther's effort to change the medieval church.

Luther never wanted to start a new church. He never wanted to create this denomination known as Lutheranism.

He was a monk, he was a priest, he was a theology professor in the Catholic Church.

He just wanted to change, to reform the church from within.

But then, that effort to change the church from within became impossible when he was excommunicated, kicked out of the church, and subsequently the Lutheran Church emerged.

And Halloween...this secular holiday is also about change.

Halloween is all about transformation, which is another big, fancy word for change.

On Halloween, children transform, they change into ghosts, into superheroes, into princesses and witches.

They transform into pirates, into sports figures, and movie characters.

Halloween is about transformation. It is about change.

And so, this is how these two observances—Reformation Day and Halloween—share a similar theme.

PAUSE

Today, our gospel reading from John, chapter 8, is also about change.

In our gospel reading, Jesus says to those who believe in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

What is the “change” to be experienced from a life lived in faith in Jesus Christ?

What “transformation,” what “reformation” will we personally experience through Christ?

We will be free. We will be free from the powers of sin and death.

And if we think about it...

If we stop to consider all the changes, transformations, and reforms we might experience in life...

If we pause to reflect what is the one thing most to be desired as a person...

Is there really any better aspiration in life than to be free from sin and death?

Is there really any better hope than to be a changed person, a person who is not burdened by the existential angst of sin and mortality?

PAUSE

Now Martin Luther interpreting the apostle Paul's words in scripture, noted that everyone, everyone of us, and all people everywhere are subservient to some power.

We are all a slave to something.

For some, they are addicted to the power of alcohol, or drugs, or food, or sex.

For some, they are captive to the power of money, or fame, or status.

For some, they are overcome by the sundry powers of this world.

Even, religion itself cannot become an addictive power that enslaves a person.

But Jesus is different.

Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

The "way" is not a set order of religious precepts one follows to obtain salvation.

No, instead, the "way" is a person, Jesus Christ.

And the so-called "truth" is not a philosophical, or ideological framework by which one organizes one's existence.

No, instead, "truth" is a person, Jesus Christ.

And life is not living, and breathing, and having being.

No, instead, "life" is a person, Jesus Christ.

And having then a relationship with Jesus transforms us, reforms us, and changes us such that we are beholden not to the false gods of this world.

No, having a relationship with Christ, to be beholden to Christ, to be in fact "in Christ," is to be truly made free.

PAUSE

Now, in just a short time then, we will witness the liberating power of Jesus once again.

In just a short time, Everly and Ashton, and Isabella, will be baptized into Jesus Christ.

In just a short time, Everly, Ashton, and Isabelle, will be transposition so that they themselves will be “in Christ.”

And even though they will look quite similar on the outside after they have been baptized, we acknowledge that they are being transformed by the renewing power of God’s grace.

They are in the process of changing, becoming a new creation in Christ, which will be a life-long process.

And each one of us who has been baptized into Christ, we too are children of God, we too are changing.

We are being reformed. We are being transformed.

God is making us free, because we belong to Christ.

PAUSE

It is ironic, it is a paradox, something that is self-contradictory,

It is a paradox, a word we talked about a few weeks back.

It is a paradox that in order for us to be truly free, we must surrender our lives completely to the Lord, as we do in baptism.

But again, it is true, that we are all captive in this life to some power, we all submit to some authority, it is just a matter of who or what we submit to.

Many things in this life to which we submit changes us not for the better.

Many things in this life to which we submit result in the detriment of our well-being.

Only in Christ, only in Jesus, do we find the way, the truth, and the life.

Only in Christ, only in Jesus are we changed such that we are truly free, free from sin, and freed from the power of death.

PAUSE

Reformation Day, Halloween, is about change.

On Trick or Treat Night little children transform before our very eyes.

On October 31st, 1517, the medieval church began a process of reform. And over the centuries, it is still, and will continue to be in the process of change and renewal.

And, in like manner, you and I are changing because of the power of God in Christ Jesus.

PAUSE

And, Friends, change does not have to be a bad thing.

We know that for many of us, change creates anxiety.

For many, change means discomfort and stress.

We like continuing in the same old same old, because it is what is familiar.

But changing, at least in our Christian lives, is what we are to be about.

We change, we grow, we become, we progress.

And all along life, we experience what is the greatest, THE GREATEST gift of God, to know true freedom that is found only by living in Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.