

“Reformation: from Boasting, to Changing, to ... ?”

I remember when I was growing up, Reformation Sunday
was the day we celebrated our victory over the Roman Catholics!
Roman Catholics had gotten it wrong but we, thanks to Martin Luther, had it right!
And probably the thing that we were proudest of was the thing that at the time
seemed to differentiate us the most from Roman Catholics –
we worshiped in English and they, nearly 450 years later, were still worshiping in Latin,
if you could believe it!

But then something happened.
It was in 1962 and it was called Vatican II.
Most Lutherans probably didn't pay any attention to it at the time
as we weren't interested in “vaticans” or popes or anything else Rome,
but, as it turned out, Vatican II changed everything.
Perhaps the most significant change was that at Vatican II
it was decreed that Roman Catholics should worship in their own language.
It had taken nearly half a millennium, but finally the Roman Catholic Church was doing
what Martin Luther had said they should do.
But when Roman Catholics started worshiping in English,
we discovered something we had not known: their liturgy was almost identical to ours –
EXCEPT that theirs was now in the English of the 1960s,
and we, who were so proud of worshiping in the “language of the people”,
were worshiping in the English of the 1600s!
Somehow the Roman Catholic Church had taken us by surprise and leapfrogged over us.

If we had been paying attention to scripture,
we might've seen the warning in Paul's words to the Romans that we read today.

Take a look with me at the beginning of that reading.

Paul writes, *“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.*

*Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry
in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them....*

If the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot,

were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches.

If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

You will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in’.

That is true. They were broken off because of their trust in themselves,

but you stand only through your trust in God.

So do not become proud, but stand in awe [of what God has done].”

Paul is writing to Gentiles who were looking at the Jewish people
the way we Lutherans used to look at Roman Catholics.

Paul affirms that yes, the Gentiles have indeed been grafted onto the chosen people of God,
but he reminds them that this wasn't *their* doing; it was *God's*.

They had done nothing to boast about.

So Paul says, *“Don't become proud. Just stand in awe of [what God has done]”.*

And so, once the Roman Catholics leapfrogged over us, we stopped bragging about the past,
and got swept up in the winds of change.

That was the beginning of the liturgical renewal movement that swept all of Roman Catholicism & Mainline Protestantism into a broad ecumenical working relationship.

For us, it resulted in the Lutheran Book of Worship in 1978, and out of that project came a merger of Lutheran denominations to form the ELCA in 1988. And all of that is to say that our understanding of Reformation Sunday underwent a huge change. **It was no longer about boasting that we had it right and others had it wrong; it was now about realizing that it was not about celebrating reforms of the past, but understanding that we had to ensure that we kept changing with the times.**

As worship attendance began to decline, Lutherans and other mainline denominations tried to change in all kinds of ways.

We tried changing our worship – producing all kinds of new worship materials, like With One Voice, and This Far by Faith, and Worship & Praise, in 2007 Evangelical Lutheran Worship, and most recently, All Creation Sings.

Congregations tried adding contemporary services and blended services and praise bands and screens with words on them.

Here at Salem, we tried those things and even a new thing called “dinner church”.

Congregations also renewed their efforts to help their communities by their charitable efforts.

But nothing reversed the overall decline in membership among White Mainline Protestant denominations.

Again, perhaps, if we had been paying better attention to scripture, we would have noticed what Ezekiel says in our 1st reading & what Paul says a bit further along in our 3rd reading.

Take a look at the first reading:

God says through the prophet Ezekiel, *“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you.*

I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.

And I will put my Spirit in you...”

And Paul writes, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”*

Both of these messengers of God remind us

that change is not something that *we* do but something that *God* does.

We don’t give ourselves new hearts or new spirits.

We don’t take out our stony stubborn hearts; we don’t give ourselves tender, responsive, hearts.

We don’t put God spirit within us & we’re not the ones transforming ourselves or renewing our minds.

No, it is *God* who gives us a new heart and a new spirit.

It is *God* who takes out our stony, stubborn hearts, and gives us tender, responsive ones.

It is *God* who puts his Spirit in us. And it is *God* who transforms us by the renewal of our minds.

Yes, we went from boasting on Reformation Sunday about how we had gotten it right once and for all to understanding that that there needed to be continuing change in the church, but I think we have yet to understand that it’s not about us changing but about allowing ourselves to be changed by God.

If you look again at that 3rd reading from Romans, you’ll see what Reformation Sunday is really all about.

Paul, tells us that instead of boasting, instead of being proud, instead of trusting in ourselves, we simply need to stand in awe

over *“the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”*, and

over *“how unsearchable and inscrutable are God’s judgments and ways!”*

He goes on to say,

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy & acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship...
so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good & acceptable & perfect”*

Because, you see, when each of us opens our bodies and minds and hearts and spirits
to the God of all power and might,
then God will begin the work of transforming each of us from the inside out,
and as each of us are transformed, so will the congregation be transformed,
and as each congregation is transformed, so will the wider church be transformed.

That’s what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus in our gospel for today, when he said:

*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”.
...no one can enter the dominion of God without being born of the Spirit.
What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'.
The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

That’s how reformation happens. It begins with a transformation of a single mind and heart.

The people of Israel didn’t create themselves –

they were conceived when God appeared to Abraham and invited him on a journey.

The Exodus didn’t happen because the enslaved Hebrews came up with an escape plan –

it happened when God appeared to Moses in a burning bush.

The Church didn’t happen because the disciples put together a strategic plan –

it happened when the Holy Spirit poured into them on the day of Pentecost.

The Church didn’t spread across the world because the disciples decided to scale it –

it happened when a vision of Jesus Christ spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus.

The Reformation didn’t start because a group of people within the church passed a resolution –

it happened because God spoke to Martin Luther through scripture and changed his life.

Let me make it clear.

There is nothing any of us can do to bring life to this congregation or even to a new mission.

We are simply branches.

If we are detached from the Vine, we will die, but if we are attached to Jesus,

we will not only live, but we will have life and have it abundantly.

And the way we become and stay attached to the Vine

is by each of us inviting and welcoming God’s Spirit into our lives

and allowing that Spirit to completely change our hearts and minds.

And as the Spirit works to transform each one of us, the Spirit will mightily transform this congregation.

Reformation Sunday is not a day to boast over the past.

And Reformation Sunday is not a day to decide what *we* need to do to change the present.

Instead, today, this Reformation Sunday,

is the day for us to open our minds and bodies, hearts and souls, and invite the Spirit in

and then allow the Spirit to blow us where it will.

If we do that, I promise you that *next* Reformation Sunday, we will be in a new place –

*we will be standing in awe... [over] the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
For from God and through God and to God are all things!*

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen and Amen and Amen!