

Reformation Sunday 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 25, 2020

Matthew 9:9-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In universities and seminaries, we tend to talk about Reformations, plural. There were Bohemian reformers before Martin Luther was ever born. There was the early Swiss Reformation, begun by Huldrych Zwingli, which was mostly on its own axis, not dependent upon Luther. There was a Reformation in England led by a king who went through a number of wives seeking a male heir. The Catholic Church itself underwent a significant Reformation after Luther's death. Reformations, plural. Our calendar lists a number of renewers of the church, including Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, and the Wesley brothers. Today our choir sings the music of Felix Mendelssohn. Felix's grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was the Jewish philosopher who inspired what came to be known as Reformed Judaism. Some scholars describe Jesus himself, and John the Baptizer, as Jewish reformers. Reformations, plural.

But when people talk about THE Reformation, we can reasonably know which one they mean. When somebody mentions "London," we don't usually interrupt them to ask them if they mean "London, Ontario." When someone mentions Bach's *Magnificat*, we don't interrupt them to ask if they are referring to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. THE Reformation refers to the German Reformation, the Lutheran Reformation. Our heritage. And the one man in particular, who, although he was very flawed, demonstrated the impact that one conscience, one courageous heart, can have on the course of history.

If you and I were to look at Christianity today for evidence of corruption we might quickly seize upon predatory sexual abuse. It is grim that there are predators in the churches. What has been even worse has been the attempts to cover it up. Or to blame the victims for what happened to them. What triggered the Lutheran Reformation was not sexual predation. It was predatory abuse of the human conscience. On a widespread scale. The church was taking advantage of the guilty conscience that most sentient beings have in the most vulnerable parts of our souls.

The work of the church is the work of Grace. To comfort the guilty conscience with God's forgiveness. To close up the open wounds caused by anger and ego and hatred and by all forms of sin. To set free those who are captive to fear and darkness. Jesus used a medical analogy: "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*" Jesus' words echo in the expression that the Church is a hospital for sinners. Not a museum for saints, or a hotel for saints. But a hospital for sinners. Imagine if you went to a doctor or a hospital seeking treatment, but instead of curing or healing you, the hospital and the doctor tried to turn you into

a revenue stream. Managing illness indefinitely can be much more lucrative than achieving wellness.

That was the situation in the church in the time of Martin Luther. There was no one evil architect, no single wicked pope who created the very bad situation in the medieval church. But in its practice and in its theology as they the medieval church had placed the laity— and even monks like Martin Luther— onto a treadmill of uncertainty both in this life, even in the life to come. The villain in the story of the 95 Theses is the Dominican Johannes Tetzel. Whose great slogan was: *As soon as the coin in the money box rings, the soul from purgatory springs.* Your Christian loved ones are suffering undescrivable pain. Not in hell, but in a place called purgatory. And for a price, you can set them free from suffering and speed up their journey to paradise. For a price. For a price. For a price. Predatory abuse of the human conscience.

I asked you to imagine a hospital that kept you sick in order to make more money. Instead of making you well. Luther said, in thesis number 82 of the 95 theses, that if the pope has the power to release souls from purgatory, then why doesn't he immediately do so, out of kindness, instead of demanding money. Wouldn't the Christian thing to do be to put an end to it for mercy's sake? If you have the medicine on hand, the Christian thing is to use it. But there was no profit to be had in showing mercy.

So that was the situation. It played out everywhere, not just with Tetzel. It was in the Sunday mass, it was in the pilgrimages and the shrines and the relics. It was in the byzantine canon laws about marriage. It was in the fear of dying without the last rites, or of an infant dying before baptism. An unending, fearful treadmill of existence. It was all pervasive through Christian civilization.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth is credited with triggering a revolution in Protestant theology in the crisis of the two world wars. Barth said, "I was like a man climbing a bell tower at night," he said, "who lost his balance, grasped the bell rope and woke up the whole town!" He was referring to his, Barth's, commentary on Romans. In the sixteenth century, it was Martin Luther who stumbled onto Paul's letter to the Romans. And grabbed a rope in the darkness. And rang the bell. *"For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."* Paul the Apostle said. In our reading today, and throughout Romans, and in Second Corinthians, and in Galatians. And in the voices of other writers of the Bible. The great treadmill of human existence that the medieval church had created was unsustainable. And could never withstand a fresh reading of the Bible. As translators like Luther and others put the Bible into plain language, and the newly invented printing press put it into widespread circulation.

The sale of indulgences— in the manner that Tetzel was selling them— could not withstand Luther and the Bible and the spirit of the Reformation. And so at the Council of Trent, within a generation of Luther's death, the Catholic Reformation banned the sale of indulgences. They still exist in the Catholic church, but not for sale for money. The 95 Theses themselves prevailed

within the actual Roman Catholic Church within 50 years of the original posting of those theses in Wittenberg.

The Church will always need Reformation. The liturgical color for this day is the red of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit must always raise up new leaders and fresh perspectives to keep the church from growing complacent and corrupt. Reformations, plural. The flame of the *Lutheran* Reformation burns still vigilant against the temptation of the Church and her leaders to prey upon sinners and hold them captive, rather than liberating them with Gospel. The work of Grace is the true work of the Church. So says the Lutheran Reformation. So say we all. Amen.