

Re-Reformation 2019

(Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46;
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36)

These are risky readings, warping our view of Reformation Sunday.

The risk arises since, even at the ripe old age of nearly 536 years old, still Martin Luther is a raucous hilarious mic-dropping butt-kicking no-holds-barred headline-grabbing cultural-innovating brainiac wise-cracking ninja kung fu dynamo rockstar superhero...at least according to the psycho diehard metal head over-the-top Lutherans. Which may taint our view just a wee smidge.

With that, these readings, always assigned as lectionary readings for Reformation Sunday, don't function like Bible readings normally would on a Sunday. They're not here to speak for themselves, but are intended to point us back to Luther, back to 1517 and the years following, to the disputes of that time and the core theological argument.

... Still, I want to pause and note that it's not the theological core of a few Reformers. I would reiterate and reinforce that, if anything, it's recovering the biblical core, the center of the God we know in Jesus, the heart of this good news faith, the kernel of who we are in relation to God. This isn't a Martin Luther deal. It's not a Lutheran identity. It's not just Protestants. This is Christian, but also proclaimed in our Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures.

One way I like to make this distinction is when I'm asked if the ELCA is the liberal or the conservative kind of Lutheran, compared to Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, I get a kick out of answering that we're the conservative ones, because nothing will interfere with our total insistence that God loves you. We recognize this as the beating heart of our faith. The word "evangelical" in E.L.C.A. comes from the word

for good news, and we strive foremost to maintain that good news. The indispensable component is absolutely grounded in and flowing from God's love for us. That's our core. That's what matters.

So if absolutely anything gets in the way of that, those interruptions and interventions displace the vital central message. As soon as it becomes an implication that God loves you...except. Except if you're divorced, except for your financial status, except you're not very nice, except you're not trying hard enough, except you're not really repentant, except if life's not going well, except if your faith isn't very certain, except if you fit (or don't fit) into society this way or that way or any way, except you're, well...you. As soon as any exception starts to creep in, giving you lessons and telling you you need to be different somehow, and it infringes on the core message of God's love for you, then we've lost our center. It makes you or culture or your worries or sin more powerful, more important than God.

So the ELCA—certainly not always, never exclusively, but with strong focus and intention—the ELCA conserves this message of God's assessment of you in love as the primary declaration. We keep it when many others allow the good news to be overshadowed. At least on our good days, we recognize as most ultimate God's passionate work for you. We don't have a corner on that market. But it does mean other things shouldn't become more imperative, like our sense of self or our pet projects or institutional preservation or social justice passions or views of the Other or past or plans or whatever. God loves you, beginning and end of story. Thesis statement. Main point. Anything else is a footnote.

For all variety of things that can mess it up, it's ironic that it ends up being the focus on our history that's problematic for us today, when we

look to Luther and want to hold his superhero tradition so central, as if he's an essential, banner aspect. Oops!

Back to the point about these Bible readings: they are intended to highlight the theological theme that Luther so clearly lifted up. But whereas we can find that theme reverberating under every Bible passage, these today are chosen not really to keep us centered in the message, but to remind us of Luther keeping us centered in the message.

So we have Psalm 46, which we sang just to remove any vague pretense; this Psalm was assigned for today because Luther's paraphrase of it became a popular hymn. Sure, it's a great Psalm, proclaiming that even when society is shaking and natural disasters storming, still we are held by God, "a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Hopefully you got some of that as we sang. But maybe you mostly thought of Martin Luther.

The other readings do it, too. The end of the Romans reading is there as the direct language for the 16th Century framing of this. When the Evangelical Protesters were threatened with excommunication and possible death and had to give an accounting of their beliefs, this verse summarized the core, the doctrine on which the church stands or falls: justification by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Of course, that's awful church-speak and not very illuminating to hear. Even if it is our alleged core, "justification" isn't a helpful term. In our re-translation, it came across as "correct," that there's nothing you can finally say is wrong with your life, since you've been set right or deemed correct with God. Whatever was wrong has been corrected, and this flows into your other relationships.

That perspective is also the point of the Jeremiah reading, that what sets us right and

renews our relationships isn't the law, isn't finger-wagging of shouds and oughts, isn't that you're so brow-beaten into doing exactly what you're supposed to and threatened with punishment if not. It's not that you've finally learned your lesson and try hard enough to love your neighbor. It's simply that God won't give up, won't let you fall away, and God's love flowing into you flows also out from you. You've got a new heart, brought about and effected by God having an awful memory when it comes to sin, even though God excels at remembering the promises for you.

But this reading about right relationships gets corrupted and corroded into antagonisms, with a disparaging view claiming that the old covenant was Catholicism versus the Reformers' new faith. Still worse is to claim that Christianity is the new covenant, superseding Judaism. We keep falling into the old traps, in service of what we should be rallying against.

The language of Jesus, then, is that you've been freed. Trying to climb out of sin is like trying to climb out of your skin. There's no way you can wriggle or squirm or run fast enough to get away. In fact, trying just sinks you further in. But you're no longer enslaved. You're freed. Not having to earn your keep, but given the gift of inheritance, life, freedom from God.

So they're all great Bible readings that lead to some very central stuff for us. But the pointer gets skewed because we end up using them to point to Martin Luther, point back five centuries.

That's not okay if today becomes a history lesson, a rearview mirror, a self-congratulatory party, a retrospective, if the story stops at Luther.

But it can be okay, or better than okay, when it helps reinforce and resonate the core message of what God does for you, when you thank Luther on the way past, then continue to Jesus. It can be great when it gives you new

life, when you are inspired and invigorated and ready to live. When you are comforted in knowing you are eternally loved. When security isn't built on being the in-group but rests in Jesus.

See, this is still a word for today. Another of the ideas handed down to us is *semper reformanda*—always reforming. Reformation Sunday is because Jesus is still working on us, because this central message needs to be spoken and lived into our own time and place, into our lives, into every day and each moment.

So four quick examples of how we're still and always reforming:

1. I'm reading a book recommended by Sarah Key called *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (That's us, folks.) Pastor Lenny Duncan talks about having a prison record but coming into a Lutheran congregation and being told he was welcome at the communion table, no strings attached. That's grace, and it changed him. But he also says if that's really the message, we've horribly excluded and put down African Americans, and for the sake of the message we need to fix it. He points out that too long has "white is holy and black equals sin" (67). It's at his suggestion that I'm wearing this black cassock today, among the ways God's working and this church is still and always reforming.

2. This afternoon, the synod Reconciling in Christ team is celebrating 10 years of the ELCA vote to be more inclusive to LGBTQ people. It was a step, but we need more. Still there's way, way, way too much from the church that makes people not feel okay, feel at risk, feel incorrect because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. God loves you and that's what makes you correct, so we need to figure out how everybody gets to hear that message. We're still and always reforming.

3. 500 years ago, some of the focus straightened out our relationship with God. Now we're straightening out our relationship with all the other creatures, not thinking humans are the only important ones or that only we are loved by God. We practice this at the MCC, sometimes referred to as an Eco-Reformation. With our Earthkeeping liturgy today, we have some reminder of the spread of this work, which invites us to be still and always reforming.

4. God loves You. You're the last example. I don't know how you need that message today, what difference it makes, what other insidious demonic voices it might shut down that have called you wrong, how this good news might well up inside of you, what it will do with your heart and what exactly is the new life you'll live. But that assurance is your core: you're always being made new, always given a fresh start, set free as a beloved child of God, still and always reforming.

