

For Reformation Sunday
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
October 29, 2023

Psalm 1
Matthew 22: 34-46

As we look back at the Reformation, we are looking back 500 years! Let's keep that in mind - the world has changed dramatically in the last 100 years, and is probably almost unrecognizable to someone from 5 centuries ago.

Let's keep in mind the things the Reformers, and particularly Martin Luther, objected to:

- worshipping in Latin, a language almost no one knew.
- denial of the cup to the laity in the sacrament
- seeking donations in exchange for the promise of a shorter time in purgatory

Well, let's take these one by one. Latin is the mother tongue of the Western church. The Eastern church still worships in Greek —except for those who use Slavic or Russian or Arabic. It was only in the west that Latin was established as “the” language. Luther objected to this, and wanted worship in the language the people could understand. A decent reform, wouldn't you agree? He translated the mass into German. We in turn worship in English except for the odd phrase or two from Hebrew or Latin.

There is a slightly deeper issue here, which I summarize by asking, “Who is Gloria Patri?” We use a language in the traditional church worship that is not terribly intelligible to those outside; it is full of insider-speak. What is a narthex? Or a chancel? Why do we call the songs, “hymns?” The Church's usage is full of terms that the outsiders will not understand. Part of that means we should change or at least, be aware of what might not be understood, and part of it means we need to educate folks into our usage. So despite the appearance of being finished, this part of Luther's protest is an ongoing issue.

Denial of the cup to the laity — in some ways, this one is easier. In those days, it was thought that the wine actually became the very blood of Christ, and so it couldn't be dribbled or spilled by some oafish peasant. It was common for only the priests to drink from the cup and then not too often. We have a very different view of the elements, and so we take them carefully and respectfully, but we don't mind everyone having some.

The third thing Luther took issue with is the claim that the church could shorten one's stay in purgatory if donations were received. “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs,” went a little rhyme. We don't believe in purgatory, nor that our donations affect it. And we don't have the Sistine Chapel to fund....

Luther, it is said, “kicked off” the Reformation by bravely and defiantly nailing his objections to the door of the church! Nothing about that is true, except for the church door. It was a university town, and that’s where you hung notices. His said he was willing to debate some things, and he hung it there where people would see it. When we lived around Purdue, you saw the same thing: notices everywhere, even taped to the sidewalk. And Luther’s theses are, for the most part, very obscure topics in philosophy that wouldn’t mean much to most of us.

History being what it is, Luther was condemned, and so defended by his followers, and through the years, the events of 1517 became embellished by legend. But it was mostly a protest against the selling of indulgences. Along the way, Luther taught that salvation came by grace through faith in God, as a gift from God, and not from anything we do. That convinced Calvin to abandon law school, and to abandon Paris, and so he went off to Geneva, where he was an unofficial pastor and leader for most of his life. He wrote and rewrote his Institutes of the Christian Religion several times over the years.

Calvin was a dyspeptic sort, not at all like the beer-drinking Luther. Luther loved to sit around a table with his students and talk; Calvin gave sermons and lectures two or three times a week. He was sometimes grouchy. But he took seriously the task of reforming the church. He taught many people, including John Knox, a leader from Scotland. Knox went back and reformed the Scottish church, and turned Scotland away from Catholicism. And of course, the “Scotch-Irish” people came here from Scotland via Northern Ireland, and settled the mountains of the Carolinas.

Well, let’s leave the history behind for now. Think about where we are as a Church, here and across the country. There is a motto from the Reformation that says something about a Reformed Church always being reformed by the Holy Spirit. The short version says “a Reformed Church always reforming itself,” but that’s just wrong. We are reformed constantly as the Spirit moves to draw us closer to Jesus. All of this, from the first day until now, was done to serve Jesus fully and properly.

That’s who we are. That’s what we do. Let’s be clear on that: no matter how wonderful our traditions, how good our intentions, anything we do that becomes an obstacle to serving Jesus more fully, should be abandoned.

And so we come to the Lord’s Table. Well, we don’t come today, though Calvin himself said we should come every Sunday. But we come fairly often. A Presbyterian pastor who taught in a seminary once wrote that, in times of crisis the Church should pray and celebrate the sacraments. There is plenty of crisis in our world just now, and plenty to worry about. There are those who want to retreat to the past and look at the history of things, and those who want to run forward to this or that imagined future. What the Church should do is look for the voice of God amid all the noisy voices of our time, and look for the vision that God has for the future of this world. We want to be on that side!

We don’t worry about “oafish peasants” spilling the blood of Jesus on the floor. In fact, we offer it to anyone who comes and all who come. Everyone is welcome here; that’s the position of the Reformed Protestant Presbyterian church. There are those out there who

disagree, even some within our reformed tradition. The Spirit will deal with them; as for us, we must follow where we have been led, and do what the Spirit has taught us to do.

What language shall we speak? What style of music shall we have? What kind of choir do we prefer? Some of that is what John Calvin called, “Adiaphora,” or “indifferent things.” I think we have to do what we do in a way that communicates to everyone and leads everyone closer to Jesus.

The medieval church thought it was a dispensary of grace, that it could decide who got God’s grace and when. In the centuries that have elapsed the picture has changed. The Reformation churches don’t see themselves that way. If anything, God’s grace is wider than the doors of the church! God will welcome all who will come, and love them all with a love stronger than death. That’s who God is, and that’s the God whom we serve.

We serve Jesus who said to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. That’s who we serve and what we are about. We don’t do it perfectly all the time; sometimes we mess it up, and get it wrong. But we try our best and we pray that God’s grace will provide for us.

That’s really all anyone can do! Thanks be to God. Amen.