

The Gifts of the Reformation  
Ephesians 2:4-10, 13-22  
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Reformation Day – 500!  
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Reformation Day – 500 hundred years ago on October 31, Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses on the Wittenberg Door, the event that most would say started the Reformation. I have had a wonderful time preparing for this day, reading about so many characters who played a role in the Reformations. Why do we say Reformations? Well, because we believe the church is always reforming and being reformed by the Word of God. And while we are celebrating this particular day, we know that there were rumblings in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Church, as people began translating the Bible into the language of the people. There were earlier reformers, crying out about unfaithfulness in the church. Some reformers remained in the Roman Catholic Church, others left or were forced out.

Over time we came to pinpoint this year of 1517 as the most pivotal. Luther's action, followed by Calvin's and many others, quite literally split the western Church, which had already divided in 1000, between Rome and Constantinople – Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. But in Europe, nearly everyone was Roman Catholic and it is hard to emphasize just how dominant and powerful the Catholic Church was. And when the Church, or any Country or political leader has too much power, there is a big, big problem.

Our purpose today is quite different from days done by, when great animosity still existed between branches of the Christian faith. In our day, it is no big deal that many of you grew up Roman Catholic or Baptist or no tradition at all. We have ordained ministers in this congregation who are Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Disciples of Christ. We no longer call a Roman Catholic-Protestant marriage a mixed marriage, because we are not focused on theological or ecclesiastical differences but similarities. So why celebrate this day? The editor of Presbyterian Outlook was right when she said we should commemorate this day, instead of celebrate it. She's right, because we never want to celebrate church division, and there's been a lot of it, especially in these 500 years. This division has led people to kill one another in the name of church purity.

(slide) We were not able for many years to further much peace or unity, when everyone seemed focused on purity of doctrine and unity of practice. But I wonder if purity issues are always related to power issues. Jesus and the religious leaders of his day – purity issues, power issues. That takes us back to last week's sermon on "Whose is It?" In the decades and centuries, following the Reformation, there have been many fights were over "Whose is the True Church of Christ?" In our 21<sup>st</sup> Century, post-Enlightenment outlook, when the church is no longer powerful politically, it is easier for all of us to believe that we are struggling together, all branches of the Church Universal, seeking in our own unique but shared ways to be the true, the faithful church of Christ.

I have chosen to read a passage from Ephesians that I think captures the essence of both Reformation and the Unity of the Church Universal. This text tells us "by grace you have been saved through faith, a gift of God, not the result of works" (slide) and it also provides the corrective to a cheap grace, teaching that we are created in Christ FOR good works, which God planned to be our way of life.

Then the text goes on to remind us of our peace with one another -- that Christ breaks down walls of division. When this letter to Ephesians was written, the wall of division was between Christian of Jewish and Gentile background. We created our own divisions, and need to hear this message too.

Third, this passage reminds us of our unity. With Christ as cornerstone, and with the apostolic tradition and the prophets, we are being built into a dwelling place for God.

Hear this beautiful passage of peace, unity, and purity of the faith, the one we read when Peace was chartered as a congregation.

### **Ephesians 2:4-10, 13-22**

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

<sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

<sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (NRS)

Many Protestant preachers will focus on the five solas of the Reformation. Here they are just so you are informed:

Sola Scriptura (“Scripture alone”): The Bible alone is our highest authority.

Sola Fide (“faith alone”): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia (“grace alone”): We are saved by the grace of God alone.

Solus Christus (“Christ alone”): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King.

Soli Deo Gloria (“to the glory of God alone”): We live for the glory of God alone.

The trouble with making simple statements is that there is always the other side of the coin. So *scripture alone* gets some parts of the church in trouble now, because they are not paying attention to the rest of the church, to the saints who have gone before. Because of that, you can see some really wacky preachers and congregations out there. Furthermore, *faith alone* is risky, because there are quite a few places where the scripture speaks of working out your own salvation and being prepared by God for good works.

Enough on the solas! And there's not enough time to add nuance to Calvin's TULIP either, as we would want to argue with the language of total depravity and limited atonement. But we might want to affirm unconditional election, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. But today's the day to focus on the gifts of the Reformation to the whole Church. I am grateful to the theological scholars in the congregation who have informed my thoughts on it.

First of all, the faithful ministry of the Church includes the holy, priestly life of all believers in common. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to be Christ to one another. The priesthood of all the believers together is the first gift. It includes a sharing of leadership, which you can see now in all churches, even the ones with hierarchical governments (bishops) or pastor-centered independent churches. Most churches see now the need for a power check on the leader. That leads us to the next point, because the laity of the 1500's had no way to hold leaders accountable because they were under-educated. Worship was not in their spoken language.

So second gift of the Reformation – Education goes hand-in-hand with the invention of printing: Books – for all of us – even girls! Do you realize that in the 1500's only 1 out of 10 people could read at all? By now, that figure is reversed – only about 1 of 10 is unable to read worldwide. With education come knowledge and freedom, and most of all, the ability to question the authority of those with power. One is empowered as a disciple of Christ by being able to read and interpret the Bible. Don't take this gift for granted.

A third gift of the Reformation is the call to civic engagement. Christian life transforms all of life. It is our duty to consider how this transformation is communal as well as personal. So as a Christian, I want to participate in local, state, national, and global governing that values human dignity and shared power, and protects the freedom humans have in Christ, which is a freedom for, not a freedom against other people. Blessed to be a blessing.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the pain of the Reformation. Bitter conflicts between denominations have splintered the Church into so many different denominations or independent non-denoms around the world that we can barely even count them – somewhere between 30 and 40 thousand.

In our determination for purity and not peace, we lost some valuables. Yet we have grown in our unity in the last century. A new appreciation for the unity of Word and Sacrament is growing, understood as real Presence of Christ, beyond our ability to explain but necessary for the nourishment of our faith. Roman Catholics are reading their Bibles, taking proclamation of the Word in mass more seriously, and many Protestants are returning to the historic weekly celebration of communion.

Many Protestants are no longer ignoring the supreme example of Mother Mary. And many Protestants are realizing that we should pay attention to the liturgical calendar, to the revised common lection of readings, and to the saints, as wonderful role models.

Not only that, we recognize the need for our participation with God in our saving grace – not that we earn grace, but that when we cooperate with God in the gift of grace, when our spirits are receptive to the Spirit, our lives are more likely to reflect the glory of God.

Glory of God. That's a good place to end this Reformation Day proclamation. Having sung Martin Luther's hymn at the beginning of this service, let us now sing the hymn attributed to John Calvin.

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Page | 6 *God of grace and God of glory, on your people, pour your power.*

*May we reflect your glory in all that we do and say, for we are what you have made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. With the immeasurable riches of your grace, a gift, we are One in Christ, who has blessed us with peace and called us to cooperate in the Spirit to be a more faithful dwelling place for you, our holy God. Amen.*