

Sunday, October 29, 2017  
 Reformation Sunday - 500th Anniversary

**Change**

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

*Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church*

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Change.

One single word can strike fear in the heart of even the most confident and competent person.

I have seen even the most remarkable people be taken over with anxiety and crippled and blinded by this small six lettered word.

Change.

“But pastor, it’s always been done that way” one person would remark “the church has always had this here or that there” another would declare.

Truth be told, many of us would just presume that church just not change, especially when it does so in ways in which we do not want or do not understand.

So we say things like:

“Christ yesterday, today, and forever”

So that we create an unchangeable and two dimensional messiah to fit into our own box of insecurity and fear...

Or we sing things like:

“A Mighty Fortress is our God...”

But we really mean, “a mighty fortress is our church...a rock, a shield, a sword...unchangeable and unmovable.”

And...

Who can blame us?

Who can blame us when the world outside the doors moves and turns on its axis nearly 1,000 miles per hour...and hurralling itself around the sun at a speed of 67,000 miles per hour...

Not to mention the fact that technology grows at an exponential rate...the turn of the century saw the promise of the boomers generation and my generation, the gen xers being handed a legacy of world peace only to be smashed by the events of September 11th...the millenials are already grown up and running businesses and having families...the words we once knew have faded away to hashtags and abbreviations...we text and not call...we can have news instantly fed to us via our cell phones from halfway across the world...and we can now decide that reality can be called fake and lies be called alternative truths...

We see the hopes of a better world distorted and perverted by the cynical and devant gospel of consumerism and nationalism that feeds the fundamentalist and 700 Club styled distortion of the saving grace of Jesus Christ himself.

Who can blame us when we resist change and allow fear to trap us inside the walls of this fortress of God that we built for ourselves and name c.h.u.r.c.h..

It's safer to have a refuge of unchangeable strength.

“God is our refuge,” the Psalmist says, “a very help in our troubles.”

And yet...our earth, our very mountains and seas, change around us...the psalmist continues... though the earth change, “God is in the midst of the city...” God is there amidst the changing and evolving world and “will help the city at the break of day” and when the nations ravage each other and the kingdoms of the earth are shaken, “God speaks...GOD SPEAKS and the earth melts away.”

In the ever changing temperatures of the waters...God is there.

In the warring nations and battling tribes and political parties...God is there.

In the broken promises of world peace and the rising violence of a world hell bent on self destruction...God is there.

In the vernacular of the unfamiliar and the rising of other languages and traditions...God is there.

In the ever confusing world of reality and distorted truths...God is there.

And at the break of day the psalmist talks about...at the break of day when God looks up from all those things we fear and hide from behind the walls of a mighty fortress that is our church...God wants to know, will you be there?

Will WE be there to catch the glance of God already engaged in the work of an ever changing and ever growing world?

Will WE, the children of the greatest change known to human history...the children of the Reformation...be there to catch the glance of God in the midst of the mess we call life?

Will we be the generation that continues in the movement started 500 years ago that embraces change and looks to it as a way to continue a relationship to a living and breathing and loving God...or will we be the generation to bring the reformation to a close and reduce God to that what God was reduced to by the early medieval Catholic Church as simply an idol without grace or compassion?

On October 31, 1517...folklore tells us Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg...history actually has a document dated that day that was sent to the archbishop of Mainz, Albert of Brandenburg, along with the 95 Thesis.

The document challenged the modern practice of indulgences.

You see, like many of us, Martin Luther struggled with his sinfulness. He never quite felt good enough for God and always thought about the eternal damnation that awaited him.

Ok, perhaps he was more dramatic about it than us...but that feeling of inadequacy and undeserving of such divine love of a forgiving God is a feeling that some of us might have had or currently have.

And when another preys on that feeling you find a distortion of the gospel and a false image of God.

The political climate of the church during Luther's time was such a time when those feels of fear and inadequacy were at the highest. In fact, the world was changing around the church and Luther...and the only way to shore up the church's future...both politically and financially...was to use its power to forgive or retain sins.

Good works, especially those that served the church bought you a ticket for less time in purgatory - which means purged - which meant you would spend less of a painful period of time being purged in the fires of a place before going to heaven.

It became popular to purchase a slip of paper that would guarantee you or an already deceased relative less time in purgatory called an indulgence. This became quite a financial venture...it was even meant to raise funds for a broke church to build St. Peter's Basilica.

Luther, after a great amount of study learned something that would forever change his view and begin the motions of change that would challenge the church to its core...would the church build up a mighty fortress and retreat behind the walls with a two dimensional messiah or would the church be in the very places that God is already working?

Right there in the Letter of Paul to the Romans, Luther found this curious verse:

“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.””

The righteousness of God, Luther discovered, had nothing to do with the purging punishment of hellfire or a God that would damn his people for being imperfect. Rather this righteousness comes from God as a free gift...A FREE GIFT...through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Luther summed this up in the Smalcald Articles in 1537...twenty years after the start of the Reformation:

“The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 3:24-25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23-25). This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us...Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls (Mark 13:31).[8]”

Nothing you can do to get away from the grace, love and compassion of God as shown through Christ.

Change.

One.

Single.

Little word.

Change.

Change started the Reformation...this thing we commemorate today.

Five hundred years and change is still happening and the church is learning something more about itself.

At the very break of day, the church opens its eyes to see a world of rapid and continual change around it...and when it once retreated behind the walls of a mighty fortress, drew up its bridges and closed its gates...covered its windows and turned its back on that ever spinning world...and embraced a changeless and timeless way of living the church began to die.

Separated from the world separates us from the work of God.

Separating ourselves from the work of God turns our bread of life into a stale loaf of bread...and we begin to starve. We begin to starve and forget whose we are and who we should live for.

When we begin to starve and go hungry we forget that we have a God that can endure the changes of the world and evolve into them...always being present, always giving hope and second chances...always resurrecting the dead and bring new life.

Like the church, Jesus Christ died.

Like Jesus Christ, the church is resurrected into new life...because without death, the church is learning, there is no new life.

The Reformation is about the new life that is created in the midst of a changing world.

The Reformation is about a continual and constant flow of growth, of life, of death, and of resurrection.

The Reformation is not a singular event in the past, but a continual wave of God's Holy Spirit in the world that carries us from the moment Luther mailed or nailed the thesis to this moment... when we stand in a broken and confusing world where dreams are smashed and re dreamt, and people come and go, and life brings about the fears of change and uncertainty before our faces and poses a question that reigns eternal in the realm of God...

Will you be there...will we be there...when God glances up in the world to see who is joining in the ever changing world of salvation?

Or will we be walled up in a fortress going hungry for the bread of life that has gone stale and where the cup of salvation is running dry?

A Mighty Fortress is Our God...where our elected champion is Jesus Christ, where even when all is taken from us...we still stand victorious.

But only when that mighty fortress is a God that embraces the changes of our world...just as God has embraced the changes from the spark of creation, to the fall of Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Isaiah.

Just as God has embraced the changes from Luther and Melanchthon...Bach and Kierkegaard...and just as God has embraced the changes for your grandparents...your parents...you, me...

The Reformation is about a church that constantly needs to embrace the changes of the world because that is where God is...looking up to see who is there being the people Christ taught them to be.

So the question, the question that will determine the next 500 years...will you be there when God looks up to catch God's glance, or will you go into your fortress, draw the bridge, close the windows and hide?

As for me...I hope you join me outside the walls of the fortress...because I could never have a sound conscience if I were to stay behind the walls and hide...and in the words boldly spoken by Luther:

“to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”