

Reformation A (10/29/2017)  
Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Psalm 46  
Romans 3:19-28  
**John 8:31-36**

*Reformation is not about Martin Luther. Neither is Reformation about the events of sixteenth-century European history. At its heart, Reformation is about the ways God continually reshapes the church for the sake of the truth that sets us free. The hazard of enshrining reformation in a previous era is to neglect reformation in our own. How is the truth setting us free in our time to be people of God?*

Our musicians deserve a great deal of praise for their contributions to our worship life. Did you know that Jill, Joan, and Carolyn select nearly all of the songs we sing every week? Reflecting on the tone of the occasion as well as the appointed scripture, they prepare music with the express purpose of enriching our encounter with the word and sacraments. Greg and Paula also plan carefully in an effort to augment our worship through the offerings of the Peace Choir and Resounding Joy. The care our musicians take with their work is a gift to the rest of us.

Imagine Jill's surprise when she realized that she omitted "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" from last year's Reformation Sunday liturgy. Sacrilege! I mean, it's Martin Luther's magnum opus – the Battle Hymn of the Reformation. If you're going to pick one Sunday to sing "A Mighty Fortress," Reformation is it.

And yet, I wonder how many of us noticed. It's probably not as well loved a hymn as we might think. What's more, we didn't read the assigned texts for Reformation last year, so the songs Jill chose were more appropriate anyway. And besides, how much do we really care about Reformation Sunday in the first place?

This year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, if we pinpoint Luther's famous presentation of the 95 Theses as the instigating event. And round-numbered anniversaries tend to inspire more pomp and circumstance than the average commemoration. So, we repaint our front door bright red, we host a Reformation-themed book fair, and we throw a party with brats and beer. But, **what does the life's work of a sixteenth-century German monk really have to do with the life of the church in the twenty-first century?** If Reformation Sunday is about Martin Luther and his contemporaries, then I suspect most of us are mostly indifferent. In order to mean something to anyone other than the history nerds, Reformation has to be about something bigger.

Luther himself understood that the movement that grew up around his protest was far more significant than he. "I ask that men [*sic*] make no reference to my name," he insisted,

let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone. St. Paul, in I Corinthians 3[:22] would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then could I—poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am—come to have men call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold.<sup>1</sup>

Classic Luther. He would never have wanted Reformation to become a day to remember him, even if that's often been the extent of it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, 70-71, as cited in Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, vii.

**sets us free.** The temptation is to celebrate Reformation by looking back, venerating the movement's founders and singing Lutheran fight songs. But **the hazard of enshrining reformation in a previous era is to neglect reformation in our own.** **It's ironic, isn't it? – that a movement defined by renewal should get stuck in the past.**

**But we are a church that is *always* being reformed.**<sup>2</sup> Reformation, in other words, is not only an opportunity to look back, but also to look ahead. It's fitting that color of the day is red, the same color as the festival of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit blew into Jerusalem at Pentecost to anoint the church and empower its ministry. And 2,000 years later, **we expect the Holy Spirit to continue to gather and form us as people of God, and call us in new ways to walk in faith and love. Our hope rests in the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Reformation means that God's work to bring the good news to light is fluid, contextual, ever-new.**

[Michael Coffey, "Art of Reformation"]

Dear church, even as we look back over five hundred years, let's also look forward to the next five hundred. **Reformation means allowing the truth to set us free – free from old fears and prejudices, free from restrictive ways of being church, free from institutional self-preservation – that God might reshape us again and again into something beautiful.**

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<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda.*