

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

You may have heard that we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, nailed to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the 95 Theses. There was basically one church in the western world, the Roman Catholic Church. Luther complained about the abuses of the church. He was disenchanted with the power that the Catholic Church had over people's lives, particularly with the abuses of power. He was particularly concerned about the sale of indulgences. In the late medieval period, the church literally sold indulgences. If a church member was willing to pay a certain amount of money to the church, a sin could be forgiven. The church members feared that if their sins went unnoticed or unconfessed, they would spend extra time in purgatory before reaching heaven, or worse yet, go to hell for failing to seek forgiveness. The use of indulgences grew to include forgiveness for the sins of people who were already dead. The building of churches and cathedrals was financed by indulgences. These indulgences were the main source of funding for the early stages of building St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and paid for some of the art work of famous painters such as Michelangelo and Raphael. It was said of indulgences, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Maybe we have found the way to finance the repairs to our organ! Maybe our motto could be: "When we hear the coin in the offering plate ring, with the organ we can again sing."

Luther objected to these indulgences. First of all, Luther feared that Christians would slacken in following Christ on account of such false assurances. Wouldn't a dollar be worth a little bit of lust in the heart? Luther also objected because forgiveness was

God's alone to give. God's forgiveness is a gift to us. We cannot earn our forgiveness; we cannot buy our forgiveness. It is God's act alone. It was Luther who helped the church understand God's grace. Luther felt that the heart of the gospel truth is summed up in our Romans passage this morning. We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption of Christ's death on the cross.

Luther was protesting the churches theology and abuse. Our term "Protestant" comes from Luther "protesting" these abuses of the church. Luther intended on reforming the church, not creating a new church. However, the reformation created the new Protestant church. The Protestant Reformation impacted more than just the church! It also had a great social and political impact on Europe and even America. The Reformation challenged the authority of the Catholic popes over kings and many kings gained absolute control over their kingdoms. It created a preference for government by the people, and led to the modern concepts of democracy. The Protestant Reformation is recognized as a holiday in five German states. This year, being the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the entire nation of German is celebrating it as a national holiday.

As Presbyterians, we are a part of the Reformation under the leadership of John Calvin, another reformer who was about twenty-five years younger than Luther. Calvin was not a priest, but trained as a lawyer. He became a great theologian and a prolific writer, and lived much of his adult life in Geneva, Switzerland. His teaching laid the foundation for the theology and the polity of the Presbyterian Church.

So what does all of this mean for us today, five hundred years later? Is there a message for today? A motto that came out of the Reformation was *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*: "reformed and always being reformed." God is constantly reforming

the church. Things are constantly changing. One common mistranslation of this Latin phrase has been “reformed and always reforming.” However, the Latin verb is passive, “always being reformed.” In other words, we do not do the reforming, but God does. It is God who reforms the church.

Do we see God reforming the church today? What is God doing now in the Presbyterian Church? What is God changing? J. Herbert Nelson, the stated clerk of the General Assembly, is encouraging the church to get over the lamenting. We have been lamenting the demise of the church. Our membership is a fraction of what it was in the heydays of the 60s. That also means reduced financial resources. But such lamenting is indicative of focusing on institutional survival, rather than mission. The mission of the church is not taking care of ourselves, it is not keeping the institution alive. Is it to not to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor? Is it not to make disciples of all nations?

We are not talking about innovation. Anna Case Winters, a theologian and a Presbyterian seminary professor, points out that one of the accusations against the Reformers was that they were innovating. Calvin responded, “We are accused of rash and impious innovation for having ventured to propose any change at all in the former state of the church. He went on to counter that they were not innovating, but restoring the church to its true nature. What we are hearing across the church is that we need to restore the church to its true mission. There is nothing new. We are returning to our roots, to what Scripture says God’s people, God’s church, is to do.

In a sermon Dr. Nelson preached two weeks ago at the Mid-Councils Leadership Gathering in St. Louis, he told us that his wife watches westerns. He is not a fan of westerns, but for marital harmony, decided to watch one with his wife. There was a scene in which the good guys—you know, the ones who wear the white hats—were inside the barn, and the bad guys, the ones wearing the black hats were outside, planning their attack. The bad guys were trying to figure out how many were in the barn to consider whether they should attack. There were not many good guys, so they were desperate. They decided to make a lot of noise. They picked up whatever they could get their hands on, and threw them against the walls of the barns: hammers, pitch forks, buckets, shovels. They kept picking up every object, and throwing them. The bad guys looked at each other. “What do you think we should do?” “I don’t know. What do you think we should do?” They crept up closer to the barn, but it got louder and louder. “How many do you think are in the barn?” “How should I know?” They began to worry that maybe there were too many in the barn for them to attack. The bad guys kept looking at each other, shrugging their shoulders. Finally the bad guys decided there were too many in that barn, and they high-tailed it out of there, to the relief of the good guys in the barn.

“Let’s make some noise” in the name of God, Nelson added. “If we make enough noise, nobody knows that we’ve lost members.” With enough noise in the name of justice and compassion and hope, people outside the church will hear and want to join in.