

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, Pennsylvania
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:18-20 and Matthew 22:34-40

RING THE BELLS

On All Hallows Eve (Halloween), five hundred years ago this coming Tuesday, the young Catholic monk Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for Church Reform onto the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the door used as the university's bulletin board. Luther wanted to reform the church, not split it, but as the church at that time had no intention of being reformed, the split came, and like the first crack in a pane of glass, fissured into countless further splits.

The last straw for Luther was the sale of indulgences to raise money for the construction of a new St. Peter's Basilica under the pretense that by purchasing these certificates, believers could secure for their deceased loved ones early release from the torments of Purgatory, the supposed place of painful purification for people neither evil enough for hell nor pure enough for heaven. Luther saw in this fund-raiser what we call a con job: God's mercy for sale, ecclesiastical fraud at the expense of the poor by playing upon their fear and compassion. Such pseudo-religious con jobs have persisted throughout history and abound in today's America. *Get your miracles and blessings, for a price.*

Reformation Sunday reminds us that God cannot be bribed. God is sovereign and, therefore, free to love and commit willingly to our life and salvation. There exists no means religious, moral, or charitable, by which we can obligate God to favor us. We cannot impress God with our virtue or earn from God any reward in the imaginary competition among human beings to be better than each other. Think of loving parents. Yes, they care how their children behave because they care about the kind of adults their children will grow to become, but they do not withhold love from their children to dole it out only as rewards for good behavior or high achievement. God loves us, and we are not in competition for God's love. God has become willingly vulnerable to us, as happens to all who love. Jesus came as the living embodiment of God's vulnerability to us because God desires our love in response to God's own. We may think truth comes from judgment as reward or punishment as each deserves. No, love is not in the business of reward and punishment, and it is not God's job to give us what we deserve, for which I am very thankful.

A child with siblings needs to learn that the parents' love for one is not to be played off against their love for another. Likewise, our love for God in response to God's love for

us must be guided by God's love for the whole world – for all its people and its non-human creatures as well. We are all related through God's love, and the New Testament assures us that if we deny our relatedness to each other, we cannot love God. The two great commandments – to love God with all we have and all we do, and to love our neighbor as we love and care for ourselves – those two cannot be separated.

A critic of Jesus asked him, “And who is my neighbor (that I must love)?” which really means, “Who is not?” What people may I exclude from understanding, respect, and compassion? Which may I hold in contempt? Jesus' answer denies the right of exclusion even of people we find disgusting or regard as enemies. We may not like them, we do not have to give in to them, but we must not deny that they are our sisters and brothers because God loves them.

Jesus says that everything God wants for us and from us can be hung from the twin pegs of those two great commandments. We interpret the Bible and our own lives in the light of those two commands Jesus gives us to love in response to God's love. Together they are what life is about. We are even to love ourselves, not as egoists or narcissists, but in humbled response to God's love for us. We react to other people in the light of God's love for them, not merely with an eye toward what they can do for us. The determining factor in the life of faith is God's love for us and for all.

When I taught confirmation courses, I hung every lesson from the two pegs of those twin commandments so the kids might have a way of understanding the life of faith. From those two commands we are to understand life's positives and negatives. Sin is not just wrongdoing but denial of relationship: denial of our relatedness to God and our relatedness to the human community and every person in it. Sin is lack of empathy and, therefore, lack of compassion. For us, ecology matters, not because it's hip now or even because we're destroying our own home, but because God not only made this world but loves it and appointed us to be its stewards. The person who annoys me is not mine to hate or mine to hurt. I can still get annoyed, but even so I must deal with that person and my annoyance in terms of God's love.

Martin Luther insisted that justification comes from God's grace alone through our faith alone and that even our faith is a gift from God not a religious good work we can claim as our own accomplishment. I know, the word “justification” causes difficulty. It helps me to think of it in terms of carpentry. Justifying two joined boards that should be set at right angles means adjusting them so they are in the right relation to each other, at exactly ninety degrees. Human beings, then, are not justified by being approved, patted on the back, or given a trophy. We are justified by being set right with God and each other, and thereby also set right with ourselves.

Mark Twain wrote sarcastically that we should not dismiss the schoolboy as simple because it was, after all, a schoolboy who declared that, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” That comment is cynical as well as sarcastic, but I repeat it as a reminder that faith is more than a set of beliefs. Doctrines point us toward Christ and guide faith to him, but doctrinal correctness is not faith. When you see the signpost telling you how far you must go and in which direction, you have not yet arrived at your destination. Sitting down under the sign and believing it to be true will not get you there. You must turn and go the way the sign points you and keep going. So it is with our beliefs. Faith, at its core, is trust, but it must become active trust – moving, change making, relationship correcting trust. In New Testament terms, we believe “into” Jesus Christ, entrusting ourselves and our lives to him, believing he represents and embodies God to us and for us as God truly is, and believing also that he represents us to God as we are, so that when God looks at us, God sees Jesus Christ standing inseparably with us and refusing to step away.

This Reformation Sunday marks five hundred years, half a millennium, since Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for Church Reform. Did Luther get it all just right? No, and one of John Calvin’s disciples gave our Reformed Tradition its marching orders: *Ecclesia reformata* (the church reformed), *semper reformanda* (ever being reformed). We cannot stand still. We cannot sit back and parrot Luther or Calvin. Jesus himself represents God truly, and even what we get right about him in our time must be rethought and relived in each new time and situation. Luther, for all he gave us that was faithful, wrote diatribes that were viciously anti-Jewish, and centuries later Adolph Hitler and his Nazis made murderous use of Luther’s hateful words. Calvin had Michael Servetus burned at the stake after Servetus had fled to him for sanctuary from the Pope’s soldiers. We have a monument in Geneva that represents our confession of the murderous sin of our ancestor in the faith.

Today, the traditional Protestant churches in the United States are waning, declining toward oblivion. Or, perhaps, not oblivion but reformation toward the way of Jesus himself, toward the form of a servant rather than a power in the society. Martin Luther wrote something very easily taken wrong: “Sin boldly!” Let’s not be silly about it. Luther was not telling us to do all the harm we can manage or to revel in self-indulgence. The rest of his sentence is, “more boldly still, believe!” Stop trying to be perfect and be human instead, but do so in faith, entrusting our lives to Jesus Christ and not to some notion of getting it all just right. So, I finish with the words of Leonard Cohen in his brief poem, “Anthem.”

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There’s a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.

Amen.