

Reformation Sunday
October 27, 2019
Northfield, MA

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

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a theology professor at the University of Wittenberg, posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the cathedral. Though written in Latin it ignited the people's religious passions and was soon translated and disseminated in German. His Theses led to what we now know as the Protestant Reformation.

In 1517, there was only the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. The people, especially in Germany, were deeply devout. Yet, the Church was consumed by its own interests, which were mostly fiscal. The papacy lived beyond its means, and thus, required vast sums of money. Its building project, St. Peter's Basilica, added more financial pressure. Furthermore, the clergy were generally morally deficient. Many practiced nepotism. Many had concubines. Simony, which is profiting from the sale of sacred things, such as church offices and relics, was commonplace. Selling indulgences was commonplace, too. Many of the clergy were minimally educated. The Church was not meeting their needs. The people wanted "better religion" to conform to their understanding of the church from scripture.

In 1517, people were more devout than today. Then, the obligation to participate in the life of the church was much stronger than it is today. Then, the church had answers to deep spiritual questions about life and death, whereas today the answers are not found exclusively in the church.

For most people in our communities the church is generally irrelevant, except at Christmas because where else can they sing Christmas carols? Though most people find the

church irrelevant, I find irony knowing that they would probably be sorry if the church disappeared completely. I think of a situation in Pittsfield with St. Mary's of the Sea Roman Catholic Church. That church was one of six churches in the city the diocese closed many years ago. Some people were sad to see it closed, but the general public didn't make any effort to save it until a developer proposed tearing it down to build a new Dunkin' Donuts. Suddenly, all sorts of people wanted to save the church. The developer backed off, and last I knew, it was to become housing.

Though most people today are not actively supporting a church, they also don't want the church to go away. A church's presence in a community is an ongoing reminder that God's grace is real, that despite our sinfulness we are forgiven, and that love is the one true power to transform the world. The church is one place that stands solidly in a world buffeted by change. For people, especially the spiritual but not religious, the church is their tangible connection to God, and if the church went away, would they feel God's presence in their lives?

In today's world where so much of our interpersonal connection is through e-mail, social media, and text messages, where employees set up their offices on their kitchen table because their companies don't have a physical office, where we never talk to a human voice when we call the pharmacy to renew our prescriptions, where we can purchase anything we want, including our groceries, and never leave our homes, where the possibility to go an entire week without actually seeing another human being is unimaginably real, we need the church more than ever. The church today, a 2000-year old institution, is cutting edge because the church is one institution in a community which gathers intentionally every week where people no matter who they are, how much they earn, where they are on life's journey, can come together face-to-face to

share their joys and their sorrows, to hear a voice filled with compassion drawn from the heart, and to feel the warmth of a friend's embrace. Here in the church we learn that our salvation lies not in the ways of this world, but in the teachings of Jesus. Teachings in which we learn that true leaders are servants to all, that peace comes from breaking bread and sharing the cup, where wealth is measured by how much we give away not what we have, where we embrace a world based upon Creation's abundance so no one should ever experience scarcity or deprivation, where we accept as truth that the antidote to fear is love, where hope abides even in the depths of despair, where we know that life always overcomes death is true.

The church teaches us that being saved from the law is liberation from the ways of secular life in order to live the life taught by Jesus, eternal life. We're trading the law of the Empire for the law of God.

This is our reformation. These are the lessons we know, but somehow we haven't figured out how to proclaim them to people in our community.

Proclamation is not just saying these things. It means living these things by reaching out to the community. Reaching out means not just supporting agencies who serve people, but getting to know them by talking with them, working with them, and learning from them. Reaching out means having a clear mission so that people outside of this church will say, "TCC, that's the church that ...*name your mission.*"

Reformation also happens inside our church too. In our Cabinet meetings we've agreed to restructure the budget so that a portion of every pledge will support missions, which means we won't be making as many special requests. We're restructuring the bylaws to encourage everyone to follow their passion and find their ministry in service to God and in their own way

proclaim the gospel. We're starting to think about ways to share our building with other community groups and perhaps, create a partnership which will complement our respective missions, thus creating synergy.

We have many people in our community who don't come to church but are deeply spiritual. They know that the ways of this world are not working and seek an alternative. This 2000-year old institution, the church, has always believed that another world, God's realm of peace and justice rooted in radical, inclusive love, is possible. Five hundred years ago, the Reformation radically changed the Church. Then, people wanted "better religion." Today, people want "better church." People will find the alternative to this world in the church. However, the church today doesn't appeal to most people. We're stodgy, maybe a bit out of touch.

Yet, local churches have been making incremental changes all their lives. TCC is no exception. People have come and gone. Children have become fewer and fewer. Traditions, such as the Family Sunday on the third Sunday of the month, change. The Ladies Aid Society no longer exists. There's no Men's Brotherhood or 20-40 Club either. And yet, the heartbeat of Jesus is still here at TCC.

Over time, change is inevitable. Oftentimes, our changes respond to an evolving reality, such as fewer people or simply growing older. Today, we're looking at making a pro-active change. Rather than responding to an evolving reality, TCC can define the reality you desire.

Despite what we see now, just as Jesus saw when he looked at his community, we will see places where fear resides, where hope is dim, and joy is faint. We will hear whispers of lament. We will come to find that many people seek what Jesus has been teaching us all along.

We will proclaim through our ministry that this church comforts them in their anxiety, embraces them in their grief, and dances with them in their joy. They will learn how to live so they can truly have life. They will discover a path taking them through dark valleys and emerging unscathed. They will find reservoirs of personal strength that they never knew they had. They can fulfill their desire to make this world a better place.

TCC stands at the threshold of a new beginning. The horizon stretches out before you. Where you go and how far you travel is up to you. Who you invite to join you as you step forth is up to you. Your pledge for 2020 equips you for this journey. Your pledge is your first step in faith.