

“Reformation: Going on to Perfection”

Date: October 26, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Hebrews 12:1-13; Matthew 22:34-40

Occasion: Reformation Sunday

Themes: reformation, five practices, perfection

The official day for Reformation is October 31st. Four hundred and ninety seven years ago, in 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk, began what was to be called the Protestant Reformation. He nailed to the door of the Wittenburg Church, in Germany, 95 complaints against the church of his time, which he wanted people to talk about.

From the 95, three main ideas stand out: First, Luther insisted on the supreme importance of the Bible. Second, Luther stressed the supreme importance of faith. Third, Luther believed in the supreme importance of the people, “the priesthood of all believers.”

Luther was not seeking to divide the church; he simply wanted to reform it. So he protested against the abuses he saw taking place in his time in history. God spoke to his heart and called him to be a prophet in his own time, challenging the church to be more, to be better, and to be who God intended it to be.

God is always doing that, in every generation, calling God’s people to do better, to be better, and to live toward the vision of the Kingdom of God. John Wesley did that in the 18th century, challenging the Church of England. Like Luther, Wesley did not intend to start a new church; he simply wanted the church of his time to be better at living out the Christian faith.

Wesley preached a gospel of holiness, calling on the early Methodists to avoid evil, to do all the good they could possibly do,

and to stay in love with God. He urged them to go on to perfection, living a life that was perfected in love. That was the same message Jesus taught, when asked which was the greatest commandment:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The author of Hebrews says in 12:2: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfect-er of our faith.” Martin Luther, John Wesley, the author of Hebrews and Jesus himself call us to a lifetime of growing and changing, of continual reform and renewal.

That call to reform and renewal is both a personal challenge, and a corporate challenge. Every Christian is called to a life of holiness, leaving behind the old, sinful self, and continually being born anew in the new life of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is to live in us and reform us. The same is true of the institution of the church. The body of Christ, made of up of ordinary people like you and me, are meant to be the visible body of Christ to the present generation. We are to embody his love; we are to fulfill his mission on earth; we are to be his body, hands and feet on earth.

So how are we doing? Are we being faithful to the call, to follow our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ? Not only in our private lives, but also in our life together as a congregation, and as a denomination, how are we doing?

Every year about this time, the churches of the United Methodist Church meet with their district superintendent for annual review. The DS wants to meet with the pastor and the leaders of the

church to know how it's going in the local church. Are we being faithful, fruitful and effective disciples of Jesus Christ?

This year, the cabinet, or the group of district superintendents who assist the bishop in his work as the overseer of local congregations, have given us a helpful tool to assess how we're doing. It's based on Bishop Schnase's book "*The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*." You'll recognize that title, I hope, because I've preached from it on several occasions.

So, as a church that is continually going on to perfection, striving to be all that God wants us to be: How are we doing in the areas of *Radical Hospitality*, *Passionate Worship*, *Intentional Faith Development*, *Risk-Taking Mission and Service* and *Extravagant Generosity*?

The short answer? We're not doing badly; better than some churches, not as good as some others. Pretty good; but we can always improve. Why do I say that? Not because I'm a neurotic perfectionist, but because I believe God has more in store for us.

I believe God wants our church to grow – not only in numbers but also in faith and in mission. I believe that God is not done with Lakewood United Methodist Church. I do not believe that our best days are behind us, but lie in front of us. I believe God has a future and a hope for us.

In the area of Radical Hospitality, this past year has seen a flurry of activity: We've created and distributed yard signs to advertise our church. We've sponsored social activities to provide our members opportunities to invite their non-churched friends to attend, and get to know their church friends: basketball games, jazz and dinner nights.

We had a very creative presence at the 4th of July parade, with our lawn-mower, non-precision drill team. It created a real buzz in the community. Charlie Knight, on our Evangelism Committee, took it upon himself, when he was able, to take a pack of microwave popcorn to first time visitors, thanking people for popping in to Lakewood, and inviting them back. We plan to continue that ministry.

Our website has been improved. We have a weekly ad in the newspaper. We have a Facebook page. The ushers pass out visitor packets to first time visitors. The trustees and evangelism committee have been working to purchase new, indoor directional signs to assist people who are new to our facility, creating a warm welcome.

As well, we are very close to installing a new, outdoor, electronic message-board, to welcome people to Lakewood and its ministries. We do radical hospitality well.

In the area of Passionate Worship, people have told us how much they enjoy our worship service – finding it meaningful, and speaking to their hearts. We have a variety of ways that laity share their gifts and talents in worship: bell choir, chancel choir, praise choir, children’s choir. We have had liturgical dance and puppets.

The sermons posted online continue to speak to people beyond the walls of the church building, allowing seekers, homebound members, and folks who missed worship that week to read the message. Folks have told me, on numerous occasions, how they felt the Holy Spirit at work at Lakewood, as the Sunday School lesson, or that week’s Bible study, perfectly matched the message that Sunday.

There are many churches that do contemporary worship well. Lakewood does traditional worship well. And many people share with us how much they appreciate it.

In the area of Intentional Faith Development, Lakewood is committed to helping people become followers of Jesus. We have a paid Christian Education Director and a paid youth staff. Every other year we offer Confirmation Class, and this year I'm pleased to share that we have 9 or 10 young people choosing to participate. Several of them asked for it, wondering when it was going to start. One of last year's youth even volunteered to assist us; she enjoyed it so much.

We have classes for everyone from preschool to adult. Outside of Sunday morning, there is also a women's Bible study, an ongoing class that meets every Tuesday evening, and a men's group that meets regularly on Wednesday mornings for accountability and prayer.

Also, the pastor offers classes: premarital training, pre-baptismal counseling, new members' class, and seasonal study groups. We are doing our best to offer opportunities for people to grow in their faith. We can't make people come and participate, but the opportunities are there.

In the area of Risk-Taking Mission and Service, we are a busy church. How do we serve? Let me count the ways: collecting food for the local food pantry, serving bereavement dinners following a funeral, offering vouchers to people off the street needing financial assistance, the Pastor's Discretionary Fund and the Family Outreach Fund. Lakewood people care, not only about their own, but about the community as well.

We provide Christmas gift cards to some of our families who are having a hard time financially. We serve at the City Mission, Habitat for Humanity and at the Liberty House and the Refuge. We support the ministry of EUMA both financially, and with in-kind donations. We walk in the CROP Walk.

We can't forget the Red Bird Mission and the mission trip to Paraguay. It's a risk to do these ministries – taking people out of their personal comfort zones, and challenging the church to find the resources to send missionaries to Kentucky and South America.

Which leads to the area of **Extravagant Generosity**. Lakewoodians are extremely generous, especially when they know there is a need. Last year we gave over \$9,000 to outside mission projects, above and beyond our commitment to paying the conference apportionments.

People are generous with their time and talents as well as their treasure. Our rummage sales and book sales, sponsored by the UMW raised thousands of dollars for mission and service. Our UMM give hundreds of volunteer hours of service to the church.

Lakewood is faithful, fruitful and effective in ministry. And I thank God for the opportunity to be your pastor. May we continually strive to listen for God's voice, always calling us to perfection in love. That doesn't mean we don't or won't make mistakes.

It does mean that God's love is continually reforming us, so that we more perfectly reflect that love – in our personal lives, and in our life together as a congregation.

Thanks be to God, for that reforming spirit which empowers us, as well as challenges us. Amen.