“Therefore we will not fear,
for God is our refuge and strength.” AMEN!

Protestants across the globe celebrate
Reformation Sunday to commemorate
Martin Luther’s objection to the directions
that the Catholic Church was taking
in the early 1500’s.

The objection we are most familiar with
had to do with the sale of indulgences.

The threefold teaching was something we are familiar.

Confess sins, repent from sins,
and receive absolution.

We follow similar words and orders
in our brief order of confession at
the beginning of our worship.

In Luther’s day, an additional
understanding began to grow.

That “add-on” was that even after forgiveness,
a temporal punishment could remain.

It wasn’t an eternal punishment,

but there was something to be undergone
before a person could “fully” be
with God after death.

This remaining punishment had to be addressed.

One could address it in this life or
through being purified after death
(think purgatory).

You might be able to see where this headed.

Along with prayer and repentance,
it came to be taught that
a financial contribution (an indulgence)

could be another means that can
get one out of the temporal punishment.

The process resembled something like
a commercial transaction,
much like purchasing an insurance policy.

Make a payment, receive a certificate, and
be assured of spiritual benefits that include
an avoidance of temporary punishment.

From these teachings, Martin Luther’s protest of
the pope’s authority grew.

Luther struggled with his own
imperfections and inability to know
for sure he was forgiven.

His desire for debate and reform, was
not simply about the Catholic Church's
collection of money.

It was about the usage of spiritual authority
which was being wielded to turn grief, fear,
and hope into revenue and wealth.

Thus encouraging people to trust
a purchased [policy] rather than living
a life of repentance and faith with
the trust of Jesus' example of faith.

(Thank you, Brittanica online!)

A foundation for Luther's argument was
that salvation is a free gift from God.

Today, as we engage with Paul's letter to
the believers is Rome, we can highlight
Luther's idea of justification through

faith in Christ alone and expand the highlight
to understand that believers also

participate in Jesus' faith.

It's what we mean when we say "participatory faith."

Out of what God has done for us, we do for others.
(Pause)

Every Thursday, the church had an open supper.

Billy would come to help serve by filling plates,
wiping tables, and watching the clock
for the time to start clean up.

Billy liked to help people as long as
they didn't ask for too much.

Last Thursday, another server, Rachel,
stayed to help do dishes.

"You look tired," she said.

"I am," Billy replied.

"Sometimes I wonder how much I have to do
for it to be enough."

Rachel picked up a towel to dry
the plates and asked,

“Enough for what?”

Billy hesitated a moment and said,
“Enough for God to be pleased with me, I guess.”

After drying the plates Rachel said,
“God didn’t wait for you to
become useful before loving you.”

That night, while turning
the words over in his mind,

Billy realized that Rachel’s words
reminded him of God writing the law upon
the hearts of all people.

And when something’s written
upon our hearts by God, we have hope
that it will last and be revealed as love
and fidelity as written in Jeremiah.

Paul, in his writings in Romans, advised believers
to welcome each other just as
Jesus welcomed them. (Pause)

And here is the connection to
participating in Jesus’ faith.

A connection that’s so important

in our contemporary context.

The United States is not Rome, but nonetheless
can we, like Paul and the early Christians,

participate with Jesus by welcoming those
who are oppressed in our midst?

Our participatory faith is to publicly display
the justice of God to rulers in our nation
who favor an imperial system.

In the American imperial system,
we witness ICE agents disappearing people off
the streets and shuffling them
secretly off to remote detention centers.

In the context of the American imperial system,
we witness masked men breaking down
doors of family homes where parents
work and children go to school.

In the context of the American imperial system,
we witness mass incarcerations of
the Black and Brown in order to supply
the economy with slave labor.

In the context of the American imperial system,
we witness political powers turning a blind eye

to human trafficking in order
to satisfy disgusting desires of
the extreme wealthy. (Pause)

What does it mean gather, read scripture, and preach
the gospel within a system like this,
but with an attempt
to liberate people from the depths,

the fears, and the anxieties of a system
that doesn't care whether the
oppressed live or die? (Pause)

It means, we, like Luther, must stand in protest.

We stand knowing we have been healed
in order to, heal.

Those leaders in our American context
hold wounds that have been untended,
but evident nonetheless.

The consequences of the unhealed leadership
leads others to ignore their injuries.

Like our ancient siblings,
"we watch as people with hurting souls
and unhealed injuries demand to be seen
as the very things they are not:

honest, free, and unimpeachable,”
writes commentator Zina Jacque. (Pause)

Participating in Jesus’ faith reminds us
that an untouched wound threatens
the whole body.

Like sin, it enslaves.

Untouched and untended, the wound will eventually
kill the whole body.

But acknowledging, touching, applying
the healing balm of the gospel helps us
to stand in our woundedness in order
to heal -

even when the worst might still be yet to come.

Jesus’ audience made a choice, what will we choose?

Will we choose to elect leaders who have
courage to acknowledge their wounds and
seek healing?

We have a chance to learn from those
who denied their imperfections.

The choice we have affords agency;
the ability/power/strength to act.

In the context of political power,
that means that even when people influence
our circumstances,
we are not merely spectators.

We are participators and we are healers.

AMEN!