

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 8:31-36

Romans 3:19-28

“God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.” AMEN!

Welcome to Reformation Sunday,  
with all its color and pageantry,  
today celebrates the day when  
a Catholic monk named Martin Luther

posted the 95 Theses on the  
Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

The event actually occurred on October 31, 1517.

It was 504 years ago to this very day  
that Luther took the stand to help the Pope  
and other the powerful leaders in the  
church to see that

the business of indulgences,  
that is the urging from officials  
to make financial gifts to the church

in exchange for the forgiveness of sins and  
that one could pay extra money to the church  
and spring loved ones out from purgatory...

These were vicious and predatory  
tactics to fund building campaigns and

church ministries.

It was, of course, the poor people  
who suffered the most from these  
ecclesial policies.

Their suffering was what caught Luther's attention  
and catapulted him into making such  
an act of non-conformity;  
such an act of protest.

His action took courage, but he was not  
thinking it would divide the church the way it did.

It is believed that Luther did not  
want to "hurt" the Catholic Church but  
to speak the truth about what it was doing

so that it would see for itself and change its policy.

His hope was that the pope would  
champion such integrity.

But, as you know, the vicious business of indulgences  
and protection of church power and wealth  
went all the way up the ladder. (Pause)

So, with our red, and with the pageantry, and  
with the familiar hymn: A mighty fortress...

we come to see just how the  
reformation of the church hurt,  
because even positive changes can hurt.

It divided the church body, caused a  
whole lot of suffering, but even though it hurt  
it was something that had to be done.

It had to be done because the truth  
needed to be recovered and people needed  
the truth to understand what it meant  
to be people of God.

That elevation, to be people of God,  
did not come out of financial ability.

One could not buy themselves into  
being connected, or made into, people of God.

For now, though, let's hold onto those questions:  
what does it mean to be people of God and  
how does one get there?

Is it because we wore red or because  
I'm wearing a strange robe?

Is it being Lutheran or a member  
of any denomination? I hope not...

because from the looks of it, denominationalism  
and traditions like wearing robes are failing  
to make others people of God.

As participation in churches shrink and  
we find that we can no longer rely on  
people coming simply because  
they've always been members,

We should ask: how are we engaging in  
serious reflections about who we are and  
what we are called to do?

So, it is here on this Reformation Sunday,  
in this critical time and place  
that we are called to reflect on what it means  
to be people of God.

And, although this sermon may not be  
like any Reformation Sunday sermon  
I've ever preached, the answers to our  
cares and concerns surrounding

the call to be people of God are found in  
today's scripture lessons.

The transformative power in them may,  
help us uncover what matters the most. (Pause)

First, in Jeremiah, we have the proclamation of  
God making a “new covenant.”

This one will be written upon the  
hearts of God’s people.

The confusion sometimes is that this section  
gives permission to people to have this  
personal relationship with Jesus that does  
not spill over and positively change  
the way they live or

Or it might even allow some to pretend  
they do not need to be taught,  
but these are simplistic interpretations of  
what God spoke through Jeremiah.

We should know that the concept of knowledge,  
in the Hebrew tradition, was  
not information in and information out;  
or showing how smart we are.

It was an internalization first and then  
a call to lead a new and restored life.

The law here is the Torah.

And God, through Jeremiah, said the Torah  
would be written on people's heart.

The Torah would no longer be some external  
teaching tool but an internalizing of the  
Spirit of God and the knowledge of  
God's compassion to come and  
rescue people;

to find forgiveness and to be assured  
God remembers the sin no more.

Just listen to words we sang in our psalm.

The words Martin Luther utilized in our opening hymn:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present  
help in trouble, therefore I will not fear,  
though the earth shall change, though  
the mountains shake, and waters roar.”

Hear the drama of that psalm!

The shaking of foundations, the chaos,  
the threat of drowning, and even with  
war just outside the door.

The utter desolation immediately on the threshold  
but then God steps in and shouts louder than

our cries and louder than the earth's chaos:

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Amidst it all God calms the chaos of our lives,  
like in the “Lord of the Rings,” when

Gandalf shouts above the threatening and  
intimidating Balrog beast proclaiming

“You cannot pass!”

In all of the world's distractions and seemingly  
“out of control” chaos - the psalm calms us  
to be still and know God. (Pause)

One of my favorite shows of  
television is “Ted Lasso.”

The actor who plays Ted Lasso is  
Jason Sudeikis of Saturday Night Live fame.

He recently hosted SNL and during  
his monologue spoke about how surprised  
he was with the success of the show  
because it features two themes  
that many Americans know very  
little about:

Soccer and kindness. :-)

I laughed at his words but  
they're also rather tragic.

Is kindness dead in America?  
Sometimes I wonder if it is...

But then I recall Christ  
and know that kindness is not dead.

It can't die because it is a Fruit of the Spirit  
and they are all eternal.

So, how does the fruit of the Spirit,  
Kindness, help make us people of God? (Pause)

There's a scene in season 3 of Ted Lasso where  
Ted is in a conversation with  
the psychologist assigned to  
help the team's mental health.

Ted avoided going as long as possible, but  
finally knocks on her door because he is  
suffering from debilitating panic attacks.

Her name is Sharon and the actress is Sarah Niles.

In the opening conversation with Ted she makes  
this statement about truth.



She said, “The truth will set you free,  
but first it will piss you off.”

It’s a quote from Gloria Steinem but  
sets the stage for us as we move to  
John’s gospel lesson today and our walk  
to what it means to be people of God.

Jesus said, “You will know the truth and  
the truth will make you free.”

Jesus was not making an abstract point about truth.

He said these words amidst some  
life threatening disagreements with  
the temple authorities.

And, Jesus’ truth was pissing them off!

His point was that truth was not an idea  
but a person in action...

Jesus, the image of God in the flesh, and in  
action that overflowed with all gifts of  
the Spirit - one of them is kindness;

It reminded his initial audience and us  
that kindness can never die.

In truth, it is a divine activity from a God  
who reaches out to people in order to  
get real personal and this God actually  
has “skin in the game.”

Jesus spoke a lot of truth that  
pissed off a lot of people.

Why?

Well, because kindness is not  
the same as being nice.

Being too nice doesn't  
help others (or myself) to become people of God.

“Niceness” let's people off the hook  
and “niceness” avoids necessary conflict  
that sometimes must come out.

But, kindness remains engaged and inspires  
serious reflection about who we are and  
to whom we belong.

Kind does not equal nice.

People of God belong to the One  
who reaches out to get real personal.

People of God recognize that denomination and  
loyalty to human leaders is fleeting and  
often quite unkind.

The hard truth we take away from today is  
that our denomination has a lot of work to  
do because it has been too quiet in  
the face of racial discrimination  
and nationalistic tendencies.

Kind and nice are not equal nor is  
God and nation equal.

When loyalties are confused then  
arms are taken up neighbor against neighbor.

The hard, but kind, truth today is  
that most have forgotten Paul's main theme  
in this section of Romans.

That the Gospel message of Christ is  
the demonstration of God's righteousness.

It is not about the demonstration of  
self-righteousness or  
the demonstration of making ourselves  
righteous.

For Paul, righteousness means a  
demonstration of God's  
power or divine activity.

That demonstration is that Christ stood up  
to those who were unkind  
with a "truth kindness."

Truth kindness can't help but lead us  
to get caught up in doing the same thing.

For being people of God means getting caught up  
in the love of God so that we care for,  
work for, and show love to our neighbor.

It is the truth in connection to freedom  
that will help us recover what it means  
to be people of God. (Pause)

Look, I love being Lutheran.

At least our branch of Lutheranism: the ELCA.

Today, might be a unique Reformation Sunday  
but what better day is there to look at ways  
that today's church needs to  
continue reforming?

We cannot understand God singularly,

we need different expressions to help us  
to know what it means to be people of God.

We need other denominations and even  
other faith traditions to encounter  
the freedom that Jesus speaks about in John.

We cannot understand God singularly but will come  
to better understanding in relationship  
with one another, with other denominations,  
and with other world religions.

This truth will set us free.  
Not a freedom from but a freedom for.

AMEN!