

Reformation Sunday 2021
(John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28)

A phrase that emerged from the Reformation was *semper reformanda*—Latin for the church is “always reforming.” We could interpret that to mean always changing, with innovative state-of-the-art advancements in programming or maybe the newest-fangled hymns, or now broadcasting across the internet to your devices, so the church is different than it used to be 500 or even 5 years ago.

But we might also draw a distinction between always *changing* and always *reforming*. Changes may be about things we do, where a reformation may be how God affects our lives.

Another important distinction at the heart of the Reformation is between Law and Gospel, with Law as what we do, and Gospel as what God does for us. Gospel is, then, what is always reforming us, reshaping our lives, making us new, or—with words from Jesus—setting us free, restoring to full relationship.

To offer that to you today, as you might read in the bulletin, Martin Luther instructed *It would be best to appoint the sermon for the day to be read wholly or in part out of a book since there are so few gifted preachers who are able to give a powerful and practical exposition.*¹ Well, I’m not going to try to argue with Luther and claim that I’m either gifted or practical.

Instead, here’s first a chunk of a sermon he preached 498 years ago tomorrow in 1523, and which was later, indeed, printed in a book of sermons to be read aloud to congregations. You’re in a setting Luther couldn’t have possibly envisioned, but still God’s Word comes to reform you. Here is an excerpt:

The Law reveals sin and says, “This is what you should do and should have done, but you have not done it.” When the Law reveals we have acted wrongly, what do we do? The indebted servant in a parable from Jesus is a fool who goes ahead and thinks that he will still repay his debt. He falls down and asks the lord to have patience with him. The

affliction of all consciences, when sin comes and bites, is that they feel how bad their standing is with God. Then they have no peace, but run here and there, seek help here and there to be set free, and still imagine they can do enough to pay God. We imagine that we could quiet the conscience and make peace with God.

*But the Gospel is how God deals with us. When you are thus stuck in sins and anxious to free yourself from them, the Gospel comes and says, “No, not so, my dear friend. Madly tormenting yourself and becoming anxious does not help you. Your works will not do it, but God’s mercy does it, because God sees you are stuck in such anguish, struggling in the mire, and that you cannot free yourself. God sees that you cannot pay, and therefore forgives you everything.”*²

Leaving that sermon, let’s jump ahead exactly 22 years to hear from one that, as of tomorrow, will be 476 years old, and fresh as ever. From November 1, 1545 it’s focused, as Jesus said, on our part in the family of God:

In this family, all are made siblings in the same grace. Here, we are all together in one and the same family, a great family extending throughout the world. Christ himself calls us brothers and sisters, siblings, children of God and fellow heirs with Christ. Every one of us should almost die from joy, if we are able to believe it and say, “Christ is my brother.”

Be grateful for your fellowship in the household of the Gospel, which is the most glorious of families. It does no good to say, “I have prayed much, I gave many alms,” trying to buy it with our sweat and blood, but which is as good as giving dung and farts. Rather, say, “I am a Christian, I am baptized in Christ, and I am a member of this household, the family of the Gospel.” How do you attain this? Hear the Gospel. That is how Christ makes you partakers of his merits: His suffering, death, resurrection, and eternal life. These are priceless gifts, in which we will never cease rejoicing.

¹Luther’s Works, vol53, p78. Excerpts adapted.

²Luther’s Works, vol79, p258-261

*So also brag that you are in the household where the Gospel sounds forth. Do not give thanks only with your mouth, but show it with your deeds as well. Afterward, pray: "Oh, dear God, you have called me into your family. Strengthen me, so that I may acknowledge how great, how glorious it is."*³

That's enough there, also giving me the first chance to say "farts" in a sermon. Next, as the Gospel is working to free you for good deeds, let's jump forward to hear an excerpt from a new book I'm loving about how you are given Christ and he comes to live in your heart. It begins by observing that preaching:

is secondhand knowledge, rather than something you see for yourself with your own eyes or figure out for yourself with your own reason and understanding. The point of Luther's unreflective faith in the Gospel is that Christ alone is enough, that nothing else in creation is needed to save you from the powers of sin, hell, death, the devil, and your own conscience. You need to pay attention to nothing else, not even the quality of your own faith, in order to be drawn into the life of God. But of course the result of this new life in God will be that you pay attention to your neighbors, your world, and your own life in a new way, bearing fruit and doing the work of love that comes from Christ's presence in you.

This is the purpose of the Gospel: to make Christians, formed in the image of Christ, given to their neighbors in love. To do this the Gospel must give Christians what Luther calls peace of conscience, freed from the terror of recognizing our own sinful inadequacy.

We are no longer in the sixteenth century, and the terrified conscience is not as common among us as it used to be, but we too have our performance anxieties, which keep leading us to ask the wrong questions about whether we're doing a good enough job of meeting God's standards. The great insight behind Luther's law/Gospel distinction is that we need the freedom to answer such questions in the negative, simply

repenting and saying: nothing I do or am is good enough to make me a true Christian with saving faith. For it is Christ alone who is good enough, thank God.

So now you can stop looking for evidence in your life that you are in a state of grace or have strong enough faith or are a true Christian or are making progress in your spiritual journey. Instead of trying to find something good in yourself to rely on, you are free simply to confess your sin and start again at square one, taking hold of Christ once more in the Gospel. That is precisely how you grow in grace, faith, and love.

*Faith opens up the life of love because it means you can ask better questions than the ones that arise from your performance anxieties. Instead of worrying whether what you're doing is good enough to show you're really Christian, you can worry about whether what you're doing is really good for your neighbor. That is the question love asks, after all. And while your works of love are never good enough to save you or make you a true Christian, they can be good enough to be a real help to your neighbor. In that way the Gospel frees you to live in love, concerned for the good of your neighbor rather than wrapped up in your spiritual anxieties about yourself. It is precisely because you are made right by faith alone that you are free to love.*⁴

You are free to love, but it is an odd freedom, since loving is exactly being bound, captive, committed to serving or even enslaved to another. As you are adopted and joined to the heart of Christ in the love of God, you are also chained to your neighbor with this odd freedom. To capture it in reading one more bit of sermon, which you'll put on your own lips in our closing hymn:

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand'ring from the fold of God. Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be; let that grace now like a fetter bind my wand'ring heart to thee.*⁵

³Luther's Works, vol58, p317-321

⁴*The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel that Gives Us Christ*, Phillip Cary, p202-04, adapted to be "for you"

⁵ Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing, ELW 807