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Reformation: 507 years and counting  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
October 27, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 3:19-28 and John 8:31-36

Do we ever stop celebrating in this church? Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. I must confess I'm a bit conflicted today. Because I can't decide if Reformation Sunday is about something that happened long ago. Or if Reformation Sunday is about our present - the here and now. I'm hoping that you can help me decide over coffee time today. But I suppose I should stick with tradition and at least begin this reflection ... in the past.

500 years, ago, many people were very superstitious, and lived lives that were brutish and short. So naturally, people had a deep interest in salvation in the form of an afterlife. If your life is terrible and you cannot make it better, it makes sense to hope for some form of heaven. In the western world, the Church had all the answers for people concerning salvation and the afterlife. At the time, the church had over 1000 years of tradition to fall back on. It was a system that worked for many people. But the system did not work for everybody.

One person the system did not work for was a German monk, priest, and theologian named Martin Luther. Luther was a dedicated Roman Catholic priest, but he was plagued by doubts about his own salvation. To understanding salvation better, he looked to the Bible to add to what he already knew as a priest. And he found things in the Bible he could not reconcile with what the church was teaching. The short version of that story is that Luther stated his concerns to the church, he was de-monked, and Luther went on to start his own church. But that version of the story is far too simplistic.

Let's step back and consider what problem the church was solving for people 500 years ago. People wanted salvation. And the church helped them get just that. On that level, the system worked just fine. The Roman Catholic solution involved confessing your sins to a priest, taking mass, and visiting sacred relics and places. These activities were collectively known as "works". If you did these works, then after you died you

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would go to heaven. That sounds simple enough. But in fact only saintly people would take that path. For the rest of us, there was a different process.

Non-saintly people, that is, most people, when they died would not go directly to heaven - they went to “purgatory”. Purgatory was a place where a person's evil nature would be burned away, to make them “good enough” to go to heaven. Purgatory was not a fun place - it was like hell, except that you got out eventually. And “eventually” was the word. According to some sources, a typical person might expect to spend 10,000-20,000 years in purgatory before they graduated to heaven.

As an aside - I have to tell you, the idea of purgatory makes sense to me. In the United Church we think that people go to heaven without cleansing our evil natures first. But if we all go as we are - why would we expect heaven to be different from life here? I have some personal baggage I want to get rid of. There is something very sensible about the concept of purgatory.

However, we might be discouraged at the idea of spending 10's of thousands of years in purgatory. But the church had a solution for that too. There were enough saints who had died that there was a “surplus of God's grace”. The Pope had the power to dispense this grace to ease people through purgatory faster. And how did you get the Pope to dispense some of this grace to help you (or perhaps one of your dead relatives) get through purgatory faster? Simple. You purchased what was called an “indulgence”.

Now I know what you are thinking. You like indulgences yourself. You buy them all the time. Perhaps you are thinking about something like this?

[image: woman eating donuts]

Sure, but I mean something like this:

[image: get out of jail free card]

Indulgences were the ultimate “get out of jail free” card. Except that it was get out of purgatory for a fee. Martin Luther had a big problem with that system because almost none of what I have just said in the last few minutes is in the Bible. But you might be surprised to learn what Luther's biggest concern was, because it's not what you might have been taught. And we will return to that later. We usually say that Luther's problem was that the church was collecting money inappropriately. And that certainly was

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happening. Moreover indulgences gave wealthy people an advantage, which does not sound very fair. Wealthy people have all the advantages in this life. Why would we want that trend to continue into the afterlife?

Luther actually found a wide variety of discrepancies between church teachings and what was in the Bible. This caused Luther to ask many other questions. In the end (which we now see as a beginning), Luther created 95 statements of faith. And he challenged other people to debate him on these 95 points. These points are found in a document, called “The 95 Theses” which opens with these words, “Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place.”

Luther literally nailed these 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The theses themselves are an interesting mix of ideas. Some were aimed directly at the church. #5 declares that the pope does not have the authority to dispense grace in the way that indulges assumed. But other theses seem more personal and reflective. #62 states: the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. #63 follows with: But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last (Mt. 20:16). Luther wanted the church to be subordinate to the Bible, but Luther was not blind to the most challenging aspects of the gospels.

Luther posted the 95 Theses in Latin, so that priests and other educated people could debate them. This action of nailing the theses to the door of the church is what we commemorate today. That event was 507 years ago this coming Thursday (October 31). The event is symbolic of the entire Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was the work of many people in many countries, over many years. But Luther nailing the 95 theses to the church door of the church is the seen as the kick-off for the Reformation. And the Reformation has led to the creation of around 40,000 different Christian denominations.

What can I say? “He nailed it!”

Usually when we tell the story of the Protestant Reformation, we stop right here. We declare that indulgences, and the pope were wrong, and we congratulate ourselves for

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being Protestant. Or more accurately we congratulate ourselves for NOT being catholic, and we go for coffee. Sorry. It's not coffee time yet. Besides, if we went for coffee now we would miss the best part of the story.

And I don't know where to say this - but I do want to publicly say that I have no problems with Roman Catholics. I am pleased that there are so many flavours of Christianity, each one with its own strengths and weaknesses - none of them being perfect. And I am absolutely delighted that we share this worship space with a Roman Catholic congregation. For me, the Reformation is not about us being "right". It's about embracing differences and deciding for ourselves who it is that we want to be. And having many many different denominations is the logical outcome of that.

Anyway. Here's what - for me at least - is the most interesting part of the story. Luther's initial objection to indulgences had nothing to do with the Pope, or with money. His concerns were actually pastoral. Remember, Luther was a practicing priest who cared for his flock. Here's the part of the story we do not usually tell.

Luther would sometimes run into people on the street. And he would sometimes (in a loving way I'm sure) point out that he had not seen them in church recently. And increasingly, Luther was meeting people who told him that they had bought an indulgence and therefore - in their minds - they no longer needed the church. Owning a "get out of jail" card was leading some people to ignore the church. Even worse, the "get out of jail" card was leading some people to ignore their own faith. Even worse, owning an indulgence was considered - by some people - a license to sin liberally.

[image: carbon offset confessional]

Indulgences were seen by some people like we see carbon offsets today. Today, you can keep jetting around the world and driving your massive SUV if you buy a "carbon offset". And we all know that paying a tax does not actually remove CO2 from the atmosphere. In Luther's day, as long as you pay cash, you can keep sinning. If we can put our minds back 500 years, this makes a lot of sense actually. If salvation only means going to heaven. And if you already have an indulgence that guarantees that you will get there. Then why not indulge in immoral behaviour for the rest of your life? That was the thinking for many people that Luther was running into on the streets.

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Luther brought up the issue of indulgences with his superiors initially not because of the twisted theology or the lack of biblical basis. Luther was worried about the salvation of his people if they gave up their faith. Because to Luther, the point of faith was not only to go to heaven. The point of faith was to live a life of faith, and indulgences were causing some people to abandon their faith.

Luther was worried that bad theology was detrimental to his flock and to their faith. Luther's primary concern was actually pastoral. Luther believed that we are saved by faith, but a thoughtful faith, a reflective faith, a faith that leads to action. For Luther, faith was not only about going to heaven.

And let's not gloss over this idea of "thoughtful faith" too quickly.

500 years ago, the church told you what to believe. Thinking was not required! People before Luther had been burned at the stake for thinking in church. Thinking was considered very dangerous. Trust me, as a scientist who is also a minister I know just how much - and how little - tolerance the church has for people who think. This is summarized nicely in this quote:

"science is about questions that can't be answered and religion is about answers that can't be questioned." Christianity has not always worked well for people who think about their faith. And this is perhaps what really got Luther kicked out. He wanted people to think about their own faith. And to - gasp - change their faith if things did not make sense. Luther translated the Bible into German so that common people could read it. Luther encouraged people to use their God-given brains, and to think for themselves about their faith. And I do my best to keep that tradition alive and well. You are allowed and encouraged - if not actually forced - to think in this church.

So what do you think? Is the Reformation something that happened 507 years ago? Or is the Reformation better understood as the beginning of a process of change. A process of change that continues to this day?

Our vision statement here at CITP includes the words, "We will be an evolving congregation of hope-filled community united in spirituality, inspiring worship and daring justice." According to our vision statement, we are an evolving congregation. The

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Reformation does continue. The Reformation continues in us. Thanks be to God.

Oh - sorry about that. I said I wanted to hear your own answer over coffee time as to whether or not the Reformation was about the past or the present. So I should not have given you an answer now. I just got too excited. I'll come up with a better question for coffee time.

Reviewing our vision statement this week reminded me of a conversation that happened here not much more than 1 year ago that I had with your search team. Your search team thought they were interviewing me. But of course, I was interviewing you at the same time.

[image: pigeon George Pidgeon. Not long after church union, Pidgeon said, "Who is loyal to the past? - The person [man] who preserves its form, or the person [man] who gives liberty to its spirit".]

And I was drawn to your idea that we are on an evolving journey together. That matches well my own approach to faith which - also according to our web site - says, "Rev Paul teaches and lives a progressive approach to the Christian faith."

And I mean "progressive" in the same way that I imagine Luther did. If old ideas, traditions, even theologies are holding us back, we are invited to re-imagine them. Yes, even in the church. But I want to push things just a bit further than Luther did. Because I see two aspects to Progressive Christianity.

One aspect of Progressive Christianity is what Luther was doing. About liberating us from ideas that are holding us back. Liberating us from ancient doctrines that no longer make sense. Freeing us to use our God-given brains to think about our own faith. Freeing us to name and explore our own doubts, to ask questions. And to be ok, whether or not we find answers to those questions. In that sense, Progressive Christianity is about being liberated from something.

The other aspect of Progressive Christianity is to not only be liberated from something. But to also be liberated for something. To be liberated for our present - and our future. To see faith as a lifelong journey into new ways of life and living. To freely explore new ideas. To feel free to ask any question you like. To live a life of love, peace, and community. And all of this anchored in the experience of a God of love as we find in

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Jesus.

Perhaps what we are really liberated for is simply each other.

[slide: super-luther]

Luther's superpower was that he cared for his flock and thought about his faith. Luther opened the 95 theses saying, "Out of love for the truth". In our gospel today Jesus said, "The truth will set you free". I believe that Luther and Jesus were talking about the same thing. That faith requires that we think about what we believe and not follow blindly along. And that's why I say that the Reformation is not only about our past. The Reformation is also about our present.

You and I have that same superpower. And if you want to celebrate your Protestant roots, go home, read your Bible, and reflect on your faith. Yes, you have every right to expect a Bible-based, thoughtful sermon here once a week. But you are also responsible for your own faith. And just so you know, I do not have any of those "get out of jail" cards to hand out anyway.

So in honour of the Reformation, the question I hope we can discuss over coffee time today is simply this:

"Now that we have been liberated, what will we do with our freedom? What are we liberated from? And what are we liberated for?"

Happy Reformation Sunday.

*Amen.*