

John Sampson
"Never-Ending Reformation"
Text: Matthew 22:34 - 46
Preached at KVCC
October 29, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Happy Birthday!

Today, along with Protestant churches around the world, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Reformation.

The United Church of Christ, Methodists, Lutherans, The Reformed Churches, Presbyterians, Baptists, and on and on and on. We are all the children, the spiritual inheritors, of the Reformation.

Happy birthday to us!

So just for a minute let's get into our time capsule, and go back 500 years, and let's revisit the moment of our birth. Let's see where it all began. For some of you it will be a familiar story, for others here this morning it may be new.

We go back to an event that is a simple, but also courageous act performed by a local priest and professor.

That priest was named Martin Luther, and he was upset. Isn't that a great way to start the story... You see this priest was upset because he thought the church, and 500 years ago in Western Europe there was only one church, the great universal church, the catholic church, with its leader the Pope literally enthroned in Rome. Now the one church had been telling its followers for centuries that if you were really bad you went to a place called hell when you died. A place of fire and torment where the evilness of your deeds were punished

for all eternity. But if you were just run-of-the-mill bad, like you cursed more than you should of, and you lied to your wife about when you'd get home from work so you could go out drinking with your buddies, and if you thought some uncharitable things about your neighbors and their goat that kept eating your vegetables, and you weren't especially committed to changing your ways, well there was another place for you, and it was called purgatory. Purgatory was also imagined as a place of torment, but a torment that had an end. After paying for your sins in purgatory, the church taught that you could be cleansed and one day ultimately be received into the glorious presence of God in heaven, with the other saints. And the church, the one church, actually offered a way to speed up the whole process, so that a person in purgatory could get out sooner rather than later. That mechanism of release was something called an indulgence.

Now I've made light of these beliefs, and talked about them in a jokey way. But for Luther these were issues that were deadly serious. And he saw good intentions being corrupted before his eyes. He believed that the church's pay to play attitude when applied to a person's hope for eternal salvation, didn't actually help people become any kinder or more honest or more compassionate in this life, and it also allowed the church to push indulgences not to help people in the afterlife, but to enrich the church in this world. Luther saw indulgences had become a money making scheme in which the church ultimately cared more about itself, and its financial balance sheet, than the souls of those it was created to shepherd and protect.

So, according to the urban legend version of the story, on October 31, 1517 Martin Luther wrote down all of his grievances against the practice of selling these indulgences, marched out to the local church in Wittenburg, Germany and nailed them to the doors in

hopes that his opinions would be seen by leaders in the church hierarchy, taken seriously, argued for and against, and that ultimately changes could be made in the way indulgences were sold by the church.

And the rest is, as the saying goes, history. Instead of reforming the one, universal church, Luther's actions led to its fracture into the Catholic church, and the various denominations of the Protestant faiths.

When we celebrate a birthday, or anniversary, we acknowledge the coming into being of something that we cherish and hold in the greatest regard.

For some, the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation is a time to celebrate the Protestant Church in all of its beautiful and profound diversity. It is a moment to see the

ways that men and women of faith have lived into their own particular understandings of God's work in their own lives, and have responded with new kinds of church, with new kinds of music, with new kinds of prayer, with new kinds of outreach to a world that desperately needs redemption and healing. And this is something to be celebrated – for sure.

But today I also wonder if we can't celebrate something a little less tangible. Today I wonder if instead of celebrating a thing, might we not celebrate a certain type of spirit? Today instead of celebrating *the* Reformation, might we not follow the example of Luther and celebrate God's call to each one of us to be the agents of an unending reformation? Today might we celebrate not just the past, but rather open ourselves to the possibilities of the church of the future?

It's in this spirit of never-ending reformation, where just like Luther we are the visionary agents of change within the church, that I asked

those who were present in worship last Sunday to set their sights on the future and share their hopes and dreams of the future of not only this church, but of the church in general. And the response was great! People wrote down their thoughts and prayers on pieces of paper, which were collected during the offertory. For all of you here today who participated, thank you!

Now hear where you have felt God calling the church.

The most commonly shared vision of the future of the church was for it become ever more inclusive, open and welcoming to all people. This sentiment came across in a couple of nuanced ways. First there is an acknowledgement of our church being historically, and currently, a place of openness and welcome. And this is seen as one of the great blessings of our community. But this is also coupled with a realization that we could be even more open and inclusive. Specifically, the smaller ratio of younger families with children in

our membership is seen as an opportunity to be more welcoming to a wider slice of our community. In broader terms, the openness and inclusiveness of church, in general, is seen as a possible means to resist the divisiveness and polarity that seems to increasingly define our society. Yet there is also an implicit message in what was shared last Sunday that church has not always been a hospitable place, that historically it has often been a place experienced as unwelcoming, rigid, and narrow. And that this is still the case for many.

The next most commonly shared vision of the church's future was the hope that it could be more deeply connected to the wider community. Fundamentally, it seemed like these comments about connection to community were centered around a sense that church, both this church, and the wider global church, can be disconnected from the issues people experience in their day-to-day lives. For this church, although there was an acknowledgement of all of the ways

we support and serve our community, many people wonder if there is more we could do. I think there is also a recognition that our church, and church in general, no longer has the centrality to our wider civic life that it used to have. And it is this knowledge that contributes to the feeling of disconnection people feel between church and community.

And finally the third most commonly held view that was shared was a hope that the church could be more engaged in interfaith dialogue. Historically, the generic church has prioritized interfaith dialogue and engagement less often than it has simply either ignored, or been in open conflict with people of other faith traditions. And that is an understatement, to say the least. Yet there is a great hope among those who shared their views last Sunday that all people of faith can come together and share our common values, and perspectives. And this was a hope specifically for this church. Some respondents imagined our church as a place that hosted members of other

religions in worship, a place where the beliefs of other religions could actively be explored and investigated in a spirit of openness, curiosity, and mutuality to build bridges among people and understanding.

Each of these dreams for the future of our church, and the universal church, is beautiful, and relevant, and necessary. They are dreams that reflect an honest and unblinking look at the truth of our tradition, and the needs of our wider world.

So if we take all of these dreams and merge them together in a spirit of ongoing reformation where might God be inviting us, here, in this room to be building the church of the future.

And I preface my thoughts on this with something someone submitted on their slip of paper last Sunday. They wrote, “Not all change is good.” And I wholeheartedly agree. Where I think this

person was coming from was a perspective that our church, and other churches around the world are already wonderful, open, welcoming communities. We don't need to change where we are already living into the vision that God has granted us.

But I think what you were all saying last Sunday is that we need to open up even more, where we can. That the church must commit to an ongoing process of not only keeping our doors open to those who are not yet here, but taking out the power tools and cutting a bunch of new doors in new places so people who never thought of coming into a community like this not only come, but come because they find a home here, a sense of belonging, a respect for their ideas and beliefs, and a community that shares they journey, if not their particular path. I think what people shared last Sunday also imagines a church engaged in the real world struggles of life, understands the needs and challenges of the community and becomes an ever more meaningful resource to our neighbors and

friends, to strangers and those we don't know yet. And I also see a vision of a church that finally gives up its claims of exclusivity, and embraces its membership in a global community of faith, not through condescension, but through mutuality and equality.

On this day when we look back to the beginning of the birth of our tradition, and remember how far we have already come and changed, argued and developed in our own thought and belief, can we not also look to the future, to the future of a church that is a more profoundly open and engaged member of humanity's community of faith? Can we not look ahead to a never-ending reformation where our own hearts and minds lead us to be the agents of change God is calling us to be in the world?

I say yes! and yes!

So happy birthday!

Happy birthday to us!

And may the next 500 years be even better!

AMEN.