

## UPDATES AVAILABLE

Series: The “Re” Words

Reformation Sunday: 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Romans 10:5-13; Luke 3:2b-18

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For much of my life I considered the worst words in the English language to be “Some assembly required.” This usually meant that a toy we had bought for the children or some household item we had purchased would come in many parts with difficult-to-interpret instructions for assembly. When I’d read those words, I knew frustration and probably some swearing were in my future. Over the last decade or so, I have amended my belief to thinking that the worst words in the English language are “Updates available.” These words mean that a program or app that I actually know how to use will now look different and operate differently, and I will have to relearn how to use it. The update message promises improvement. I am never sure about what was wrong with what I had. There is wisdom in leaving well enough alone. The fact is that update is just another word for change and change is not always welcome.

Today we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Consequently, our “re” word for today is reform. Reform is also another word for change, a way of saying updates available. As mentioned, change is not always welcome and it was not welcomed 500 years ago. Indeed, it was so unwelcome that many reformers were exiled, put in prison, tortured, drowned, and burned at the stake. This was not all carried out by the Roman Catholic Church, by the way. Some Protestants worked to reform the reforms of the reformers, thus the original reformers exiled, imprisoned, tortured, drowned, and burned them.

Sounds gruesome, doesn’t it? It was. It was often ugly and anything but a demonstration of Christian living. So just why are we celebrating? Because out of that mess came some important changes and an understanding that is at the very core of our beliefs today. Take a look with me.

First of all, this date is chosen as the anniversary because October 31, 1517 was the day Martin Luther supposedly nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. We need to understand that others had raised similar points as Luther in earlier years, and other contemporaries were also calling for reforms and still others would follow. The Protestant Reformation is not about Luther alone. He was a giant in the movement, however, and his actions comprise a seminal point of the Reformation. We also need to understand that, as is almost universally true for all reformers, Luther did not set out to begin a new church. He was a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, and he desired for his church to make some changes. There were some things with which he disagreed, so he was looking for reform, not schism. His 95 theses, all related really to just one point, were his way to open dialog and debate. The unintended consequence was a powerful movement that changed the face of Western Europe and ultimately the world. It was a movement he sometimes led, sometimes went along with, and sometimes

tried to slow. The movement revolved around multiple concerns, but simplistically put, there were three areas of concern.

One concern was corruption within the church. Now the church, as with all institutions, in any age in any place, is vulnerable to corruption. Of course, corruption is most likely when wealth and/or power are involved. In the 1500s, the Church had both. The Pope and those in the hierarchy were extremely powerful. The Church was closely intertwined with government, sometimes choosing princes and electors and dictating the laws. There was also great wealth, especially in land holdings with the Church at one point owning half of France. Leaders were quite wealthy. An appointment as a bishop or the priest of a particular parish could be extremely lucrative. These appointments were not given to model priests but as political favors to less-than-upright characters. The Church could tax, raise armies for crusades, imprison and execute. You can easily see the potential for corruption, and let's just say that the potential was realized.

The reformers said this was not Christian, not appropriate for the Church. In fairness, the Church did not completely disagree, and shortly after Luther's death, at the Council of Trent, actually reined in some of the abuses and cleaned up some of the corruption.

Another point of contention related to the exclusion of the laity from matters religious. Oh, the laity were expected and often required, to attend mass, go to confession, be baptized, be married in the Church, and, of course, fund the institution with offerings, taxes, and fees. They had no say in theology and polity, however, and were mostly kept in the dark. For instance, the Bible was only available in Latin, which only the priests read and spoke, so they had to depend on the priests to tell them not only what it means but actually what was in it. Mass was in Latin, so they knew the ritual but not the liturgy. Priests were given a higher status, making the laity subordinate to them and dependent on them for matters both of faith and salvation.

The reformers considered this wrong. They translated the Bible into the vernacular of the people, including Tyndale, whose prayer we used this morning. They also developed liturgy in the language of the people and included preaching in the worship so that people could be taught. (You may or may not think that was a good idea. If you consider that a mistake, blame the reformers.) The distinction between clergy and laity was greatly lessened with the concept of the priesthood of all believers.

Then there was the matter of disagreement with a number of articles of faith. Protestants disagreed about the number of sacraments, the meaning of baptism and communion, the veneration of saints, and some other articles of faith. On these and some other things, the Protestants did not agree with the Catholics and often the Protestants did not agree with each other. There is a reason that today there is not just a Roman Catholic Church and a Protestant Church. There are actually forty thousand Protestant variations today. Clearly, once updates started, they have never ended.

There is one central, core, foundational belief, though, which came out of the Reformation to which all Protestants cling. It is that to which the 95 theses are directed and rest at the heart of the Reformation. That is, we have salvation by way of faith in the grace of Christ alone.

Hasn't that always been what Christians believed? Yes and no. Yes, it started that way. You might say it started that way even before Jesus started preaching. John the Baptist got it going by telling people to repent, a word very similar to reform, and to put their hope in the one who was to come. Jesus then began his ministry by saying repent and believe the good news. When people asked Peter on the Day of Pentecost what they should do, he said repent, be baptized, and believe. This was the straightforward message in those early days.

As time went on, though, and the church became more organized and formalized and institutionalized, the leaders started to think that there had to be more to it than that. God is a God of justice so salvation could not just be handed out to sinners without some penalty or some merit. Gradually, a system of penance developed, things one could do to help mitigate sin and make oneself worthy of God's grace. Attending mass, confessing, giving alms to the poor, contributing to the church, participating in crusades and the like all helped. Still, even then few would be worthy for heaven. So it was decided that most of the dead would first go to purgatory, a place where over time and with some suffering they could be purged of their sins and thus qualify for heaven. How long you stayed depended on how much you had to be purged. Of course, if you had a loved one in purgatory, you could shorten his or her stay by purchasing indulgences. Essentially, you could buy your deceased loved ones out of purgatory.

This is the key issue against which Luther railed. This is what the 95 theses were about. If you have never read them and you want a summary, here it is. When it comes to indulgences, no way Jose. Working from scripture, especially Paul's letter to the Romans from which we read today, Luther emphatically taught that God's saving grace is not something we earn or for which we have to qualify. God's grace is poured out on those who have faith, those who believe, period. You heard this in our lesson. Paul wrote, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." A few verses later he wrote, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." There it is, Luther said. We are saved by faith alone.

This is not a trifling matter, a minor theological difference, or religious semantics. It speaks to the question asked by humankind in every age and place: how can we be right with God? How do we have to be? What do we have to do? Do we have to throw young, untouched girls into the mouth of the smoking volcano to appease the thunderous God? Do we have to sacrifice our first born? Do we have to offer animal and grain sacrifices on the altar of the temple? Do we have to follow every religious law to the letter? Do we have to adhere to a particular moral code all of the time, most of the time, more times than not? Do we have to be baptized, go to confession, speak the rosary, give to the church and the poor, or give so many hours in volunteer service? What do we have to do? We know it must be something because there is no such thing as a free lunch and surely God's grace is not free.

But it is as Paul told us and the reformers told us. God saves us. We do not save ourselves. God saves us with grace. God does not reward us for meritorious service. What does it take to be justified before God? John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and Luther all said the same thing: repent and believe. In the Augsburg Confession of 1530, a collection of Lutheran articles of faith

brought together to explain Protestant beliefs to the Holy Roman Emperor, it says this is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls.

This is the message we lift up on Reformation Sunday and every Sunday. Look, the Church is always in need of reform. As far as I know, no one is being burned at the stake, which I am glad about on many levels, not the least of which it would probably be me being burned. We no longer do that but we are not immune to corruption and updates are available for theology and practices. Maybe we do not drown the unbaptized, but our record with slavery, segregation, Native Americans, and women is not great. I think we always need to be introspective and honest about from what it is we need to repent and how we can be better. I say introspective because I get nervous when we talk about how others should reform or other denominations should reform instead of about how we should reform. Reform is connected to repentance and repentance has to include us. As unpleasant as it might be, if we do not regularly update, we will be operating in ways outdated and irrelevant and, quite possibly, wrong.

What never needs updating, though, is the biblically consistent gospel message that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son Jesus Christ that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. It is all because of God's grace. Here is the straightforward, bottom-line truth. You are not so bad that you cannot be saved by the grace of God. You are not so good that you do not need to be saved by the grace of God. Salvation is not something we deserve. If it were deserved, we would not call it grace. We would call it payment due. In the Reformation, the church did not update to that. The Church got back to that. The church realigned, reshaped, and reformed to conform to the meaning of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Updates available? Absolutely. But no update is needed on the gospel message. We are saved by faith – alone: period, full stop, end of story. That, sisters and brothers, is something to celebrate.

Amen.