

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday October 25, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?''

Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'

Let us pray...Amen.

In the calendar of the Protestant church, today is Reformation Sunday. Two words stand out to me in that last sentence: Protestant, and Reformation. The United Church of Christ, including FCC UCC considers itself a Protestant church. Protestant. *Protestant*. The Protestant Church was founded on protest. But protest about what? Who protested? What were they protesting against?

Reformation Sunday commemorates the day in 1517 that Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, posted 95 reasons the Church had drifted from its gospel and biblical roots. He did it on all Hallows Eve, the night before All Saints Day, one of the most attended Sundays of the year, after Christmas and Easter. He nailed his list to the doors of the Wittenberg church, setting the stage for a confrontation with the church, that eventually led to the founding of the Re-formed Church, the Reformed Church, the *Protestant* Church, the Protestant Church.

Luther was excommunicated for his beliefs, but it just so happened that around the time that he was protesting, the printing press appeared, and his ideas spread throughout Germany, and Europe, so that before long, people who believed in the re-formation of the church were calling themselves 'Lutherans'. This bothered Luther to no end; he begged those who believed in the reformation to call themselves Christians, but to no avail: the first Reformation Church was the Lutheran Church.

Though he found 95 reasons where the church needed to be reformed, his ideas boiled down to 3 critical things: Christians have a direct relationship with God, and do not need a human intermediary in order to communicate with God, no one human can exercise authority over the whole Church, and the faithful are saved by God's Grace alone, no amount of good works can affect a person's salvation.

The Scripture for today reflects Luther's concepts, and act as a biblical foundation for his founding of the Protestant Church. '...says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.'

From the least of us to the greatest of us, we know the Lord in a direct way. No teacher, no other person can help us know what is already written on our hearts. This is a foundational component of Luther's thought: none of you gathered here today needs me, your pastor, to communicate with God. You each have your own direct line of communication with God, a hot-line, if you will, so whenever or wherever you wish to speak with God, you may.

And no other person may have authority over the whole church, to presume to tell us what God means, or what God says. We can only know that in our own hearts, with our own means of communication. We can read the bible on our own, and hear God's loving Word speak to us directly, encourage us directly, guide us directly. No other person may mediate our forgiveness.

Our faith, our belief in Jesus the Christ, our belief in God, these alone guarantee our salvation. If we spend our lives working for the good of others, and have not faith, we are not saved. Our salvation, the state of our souls, depends not on what we do, but what we believe. So for Luther, for Protestants, for us, no amount of good works can balance a life of unbelief. It's not what we do that saves us, it's only what we believe.

So you can see just how important it is to work on what we believe! You can see just how critical it is for Protestants to understand just what they believe, because no action, no good works can right the wrongs of not believing.

I'll pause here for a moment to remind all of us that this does not give us permission to misbehave, or behave badly towards others: we are bound to follow the Great Commandment, and the second, which is nearly as important: to love God with all our hearts, and souls, and minds, and to love each other as we love ourselves.

Protestants don't get a free pass because we believe we are saved: we are called to work tirelessly for the hungry, the naked, the incarcerated, the hospitalized, as a consequence of what we believe.

But our belief, our faith, is a private matter between us and God. And for many, we just don't ever really pick up the hot-line that often. Or we don't hear it when it rings. And when we feel badly about it, we go out and do something generous, or helpful for others, in the hope that it will make things all better. Luther would tell us no: the mechanism of our salvation, the action of our being saved, the Grace that forgives our sins has nothing to do with what we do, and everything to do with what we believe.

Now that may come as a surprise to some of us, even some of us who were born into the Protestant faith. It may ring true for some of us, even some of us who have come from the Catholic Church.

Some of us take for granted what Luther fought to make visible to the world: God speaks to us directly, no human has authority over the earthly church, and we are saved by Grace alone.

The details, posted on the giant wooden doors of the biggest church in Wittenberg, Germany, are less important than the meaning behind them: these 3 things prevent us from reuniting with the Catholic Church as one, united Christian Church. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be respectful, even reverent towards the first human institution to call itself 'The Church'. In fact great progress has been made between the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church in recognizing baptisms, and sometimes marriages.

Most of us go about our daily lives not really thinking about the difference between our faith and someone else's faith. And mostly it doesn't matter: but we need to be reminded about the origins of our church, the Protestant Church, and why we believe what we do. *If* we believe, as Luther did, then our behavior will be our proof. We won't serve others, those in need, because we think it will get us into heaven, we'll serve others, the hungry, the naked, the immigrant, the criminal, because we're so very grateful that we are saved, that God's Grace forgives us our sins, and that our place in the Kingdom of Heaven is assured, not because of what we do, but because of what we believe.

If we believe, as Luther did, that we don't need an intermediary between ourselves and God, then our behavior will be our proof. We won't rely on our pastor to do all our praying for us, we'll pray to God on our own, knowing that God's presence is written on our hearts.

Luther began the first Reformation, the first re-formation of the church. But believe it or not, the Church is continually being re-formed all the time. And *we* are the reformers! As our faith and our beliefs grow and mature, we become aware of areas where there needs to be reformation.

Our church is being renewed and reformed even as we speak. This is both exciting and frightening at the same time, and probably deserves a sermon all on its own!

Much of our traditions come from Luther's efforts, and much is left to reform in our own way.

Today we honor what Luther started with his 95 theses, and tomorrow we pick up the torch and start reforming what needs to be reformed. Because we have a direct line to God, and no one can tell us what to do with our church, and God forgives us because of what we believe, not because of what we do. *Protestant, Re-formed, Christian.* Loving God, and loving others, it's what we do. Amen.

