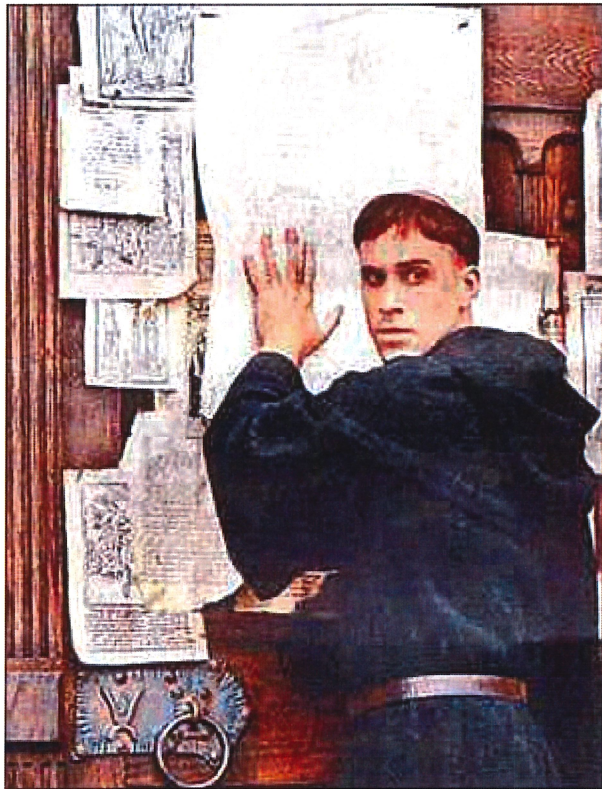


ST. LUKE'S UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reformation Sunday: What is it, and Why Does it Matter

Every year on the last Sunday in October, many churches set aside the day as “Reformation Sunday.” So what is Reformation Sunday, and why should we care?



The History of Reformation Sunday

Our story begins in the 16th century – 1517, to be exact. Bear with us here – what follows is a very simplified explanation of complex theological, political, and economic events that all coincided.

Across Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was engaged in one of the greatest fundraisers in all of history.

If a person – out of contrition for their sins and as a sign of repentance – made a financial gift to help with the building Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, then the church would furnish that person with a certificate acknowledging that gift and promising that they or their loved ones would be freed from a portion of the misery expected in the afterlife.

In short, the church at that time taught that even those bound for heaven had to be cleansed of their earthly sins and this cleansing (purging) in the afterlife took place in a place called Purgatory. The certificates offered by the church (called “Indulgences”) promised to lessen this time of cleansing for oneself or others who have already died.

There were some very nuanced explanations of this practice at the time. And there were other very crass explanations that basically amounted to people paying to be forgiven.

November 1st was an important day for the selling and buying of these indulgences, known as *All Saints Day* on the church’s calendar.

The day before a German Monk named Martin Luther posted a list of 95 Theses – 95 reasons that he objected to this practice of selling indulgences. Along with other writings by Martin Luther, those 95 Reasons went viral.

Luther insisted that we are not forgiven because of anything we do – including the buying of Indulgences or doing enough good work. *Instead, we are forgiven because of who God is.* We are loved and forgiven because God is full of grace and mercy.

His teachings and writings got Martin Luther kicked out of the church. But he didn't go alone. Others agreed with him, and after his death those who agreed with Luther became known as Lutherans and also as Protestants.

Every Protestant church traces their roots back to this moment in history.

Why Does Reformation Sunday Matter?

October 31st, 1517 was a long time ago. Why does it continue to matter and be remembered in our churches today?

1. Reformation Sunday gives us a chance to tell our story – a chance to remember.

We all have a family story – how we got to this point in history. Stories about parents and grandparents, about the things that have shaped our families over the years. Reformation Sunday is a day when we remember and re-tell the family stories of our faith. Stories about men and women who came before us and taught us about the faith. Stories about people who risked everything so that we would be able to gather and worship in the manner that we do.

2. Reformation Sunday reminds us of the most important things.

Throughout the year we preach about many things in church. About how we live our daily lives, the choices we make, the habits of our faith. On Reformation Sunday we are brought back to the most important thing – the thing that compelled Luther and others to risk their lives.

On Reformation Sunday, we return to the core of our faith: *God loved us first, and God continues to shower us with grace and mercy.*

3. Reformation Sunday challenges us to do better

Through re-telling our story and returning to the core of our faith, Reformation Sunday prods us to do better.

We are called to be more loving and grace-filled, because God was gracious and merciful to us. We are called to repent of the times that we have placed barriers that have kept others from hearing the Good News. We are called to remember that all that we are is a gift from God.

In the church in Wittenberg where Martin Luther preached, there is a wonderful painting. In it Luther stands in the pulpit on the right hand side, and the people stand on the left. In between people and the preacher is Christ on the cross. Reformation Sunday is a reminder that this is the bedrock of our faith – the grace and mercy given to us in Jesus Christ. Keeping the most important thing in the center of the picture is the only hope for our faith and for this community that we call “church.”
