

Reformation Sunday, 2009
Good Hope Lutheran Church

Today we pause to think a little bit about The Reformation, capital T capital R, The Reformation; and we begin our time together with prayer:

Lord Jesus we are here today, to hear your word and share in your supper, and by your grace to take another step along the path that leads to your heavenly home. Forgive us our many sins, especially those that cling so tightly to us, and lead us at last to walk in newness of life. Lord Jesus in your name we pray, AMEN.

This is Reformation Sunday, and to me anyway Reformation Sunday is a day with, an interesting history. To be brief, way back there, nearly 500 years ago in 1517; a young German priest named Martin Luther was horrified to learn that the Church of his day, had put forgiveness of sin, up for sale. Nobody would have said it quite like that, the promotional material was a bit more discreet than that; but polite phrasing aside that's basically what was going on, forgiveness of sin was *on sale*. You really didn't need to confess; you certainly didn't need to repent, or change; you just needed to make a rather generous contribution to *the fund*, and in return you'd get a signed piece of paper guaranteeing that sins had been forgiven and that years in Purgatory had been wiped away, you are now free to carry on with whatever low grade lifestyle you want—at least until the next time the church happened to need some money, and these signed guarantees came up

for sale again.

Well Luther was aghast, to put it mildly. All sorts of alarm bells went off in his head, all sorts of questions had to be asked and answered, like What do we mean by sin? What is God's plan for dealing with sin, what is God's plan of salvation? What do I have to do, as an individual believer, what must I do to be saved? For Luther, turns out the answer to these questions was so simple, it was stunning. In the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you, and for His sake God forgives you all your sins. Now there is a price to be paid for your sin all right, a very steep price—but it's not your money. It's His blood. And He paid it already. He died and rose again, you *are* forgiven; you *are* redeemed; you are saved to life everlasting, you have a guarantee signed not by some huckster somewhere but by the crucified Son of God, Jesus Christ is His name—trust Jesus. Trust Jesus, you *are* right now forgiven, and redeemed, and saved—and called. Oh yes, that too, can't forget, called. Called by Jesus to a new kind of life that begins right now as well, a life shaped and molded by Him this time. And no longer by your own petty sins and desires.

So that in essence was the Reformation, and as history goes it's interesting, even stirring somehow. The problem of course arises, if it's "*only* history"—whatever that means. If the Reformation is "*only* history,"

then we could talk about it if we wanted to, but why bother? It's long since over and done with, the people who lived it are all dead and buried, who cares now! Well, I'm not sure anything in history is actually quite that disposable, and I am certain the Reformation is not. The Reformation is not *just* history, it's not done and disposable. Instead the questions Luther asked and the issues he raised still go to the heart for us today.

Like for instance, what is sin? Just things I do? What about the person I am? What is sin, and are some actual sins, umm, more expensive than others? If so, is there any sin more expensive, than my pride? Another thing, if I come to church on Sunday and make it through worship without falling asleep, have I paid my dues? Am I square with the Lord, am I good to go for another week of life *as I want to live it* without bothering much about repentance; or change; or spiritual growth? If not, what instead. What *is* God's plan for dealing with my sin, what is God's plan for my life? What does it mean that Jesus died for me, was I so lost—was I so lost that God Himself had to literally die and go down to hell to find me? Me? I was that lost? And now that I'm "found," what does God want from me? It sounds simple—believe and be baptized, turn my life over to God fully and completely. Turn it over so fully and so completely that it's not even my life anymore, it's His, but if it's really that simple. Why is it so hard for me to

do. Why is it so hard for me, to just follow Jesus.

These are questions Luther would recognize, and they might be yours today. They're certainly mine. So the Reformation is not history only; the Reformation is my story, and yours, today and tomorrow too. In the few moments I have left, let reflect on some of these questions, as Luther might have.

One. If it's hard to follow Jesus, let's face it it's because we're still sinners. Now, good news: If I died tonight I'd go straight to heaven, Jesus said so. He died and rose again to save me too, so if this was my last day on earth then I have his guarantee that tomorrow I'd be with Him in Paradise, that's great. Chances are however, this is not my last day on earth. I may have tomorrow too, and if I have a tomorrow then I know I'll still be struggling with everything I've always struggled with. Luther was realistic about sin and its hold on us. But optimistic too. Jesus wins. Ok? Jesus wins, and Jesus has guaranteed us a place in the kingdom. Fight the good fight of faith, don't give up don't be discouraged, just understand that when all is said and done—Jesus wins, and Jesus won't let you down.

Two. If individual Christians struggle to follow Jesus, so do whole churches. As Luther said, The church must always be reformed. The church must always be reformed, as soon as you're a perfect person you can go join

a perfect church, till then the church as it stands is God's gift to us, but it must always be reformed—as it will be, by the same Lord who reforms us personally, if we don't give up.

And three, as Jesus said in today's Gospel, Continue. Continue in the word, continue in faith, stick with it, persist, grow, mature. Don't pretend you're there already, you're not; but don't be afraid you've done something unforgivable or that the mountain is just too high, because Jesus will find a way. He promised. If there's one thing we can learn from Luther and his faith at the time of the Reformation, it's this: We really do stand on a promise, one made by Christ Himself. It's all we have. Everything else may fall away, but the promise will not, and it will see us through this world to life everlasting. May it be so for all of us, in Jesus' name, AMEN.