

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
The Festival of the Reformation
29 October 2017
Rev 14.6-7, Rom 3.19-28, Mt 11.12-19

In the name of the Father, and of the T Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After 500 years, I guess it's worth our time to reflect on whether it was such a good idea, or not.
Or, to use today's Gospel reading: was the Reformation *wise*—
will Wisdom be justified by her deeds?

Sure, you could say, to some extent, it was necessary—the abuses were out of control.
It was bound to happen one way, or another,
whether by a German Friar, or English King, or Swiss Lawyer.
Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg didn't come out of nowhere.
And what's come from it could never have been imagined at the time.

So, to ask whether it was wise, we'd have to know *what* the Reformation *was*.
And while the nailing of the 95 theses was certainly iconic, *it* wasn't the reformation.

The 95 theses make the case that any sort of salvation from the sale of indulgences is too easy.
This writing is a far cry from Luther's "*solus*" – *by grace alone through faith alone*.
In the end, it was a strongly *Roman Catholic* document that Luther wrote and nailed to the door.
You might say: "Luther wasn't quite *Lutheran*, yet."

In any case, the event did *do* something.
Though written in Latin for a debate amongst the other professors,
the theses were quickly translated to German, mass-produced,
and given as a sort of propaganda to the common folk—we'd say it went viral.

Some of the notes in the theses struck a chord.
There's already frustration brewing over the fact that they had one of the wealthiest popes ever,
yet, it wasn't his money that was building St. Peter's, but that of the poor and destitute.

Then there's the idea that it's just too easy—
Luther's monastic life was no cake-walk, but with indulgences,
every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.

Luther's challenge to what he called "indulgence-hawkers" was also a challenge to the pope.
And that's what caught the eye of those who loved control.
"[Luther] *played the flute, but they would not dance.*" (Mt 11:17)

We certainly don't have time to work our way through the whole history of Luther's reformation.
But the structure is fairly simple, and important:
Luther's writings against the abuses of the pope spread quickly.
Early in 1521 he was excommunicated.
Later that year he was brought before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms and condemned;
while in hiding, he translated the NT into German.
A couple years later he translated the OT, as well as the liturgy into German.

In 1524 he went back to teaching at Wittenberg; the next year he married a nun, Katie.
 And in the ensuing years, Luther's attention turned from Rome
 to the various abuses that crept up in his name, or inspired by his work.
 He defended the evangelical confession that we're saved
 by grace alone through faith alone;
 and yet, just as ardently, defended the catholic liturgical practice of
 Baptism, Confession, and the Eucharist.
 He wrote hymns like "A Mighty Fortress," as well as the Catechisms,
 along with numerous letters, commentaries, and polemical works.
 Finally, he died February 18th, 1546, at the age of 62.

Certainly, it was one of those explosive times in history—
 politically, socially, morally, religiously, and technologically.
 Everything seems to be changing all at once.

Because of that, it's hard to identify what, exactly, the Reformation *is*.
 We can say what the Lutheran Church is—
 a gathering of sinners made holy by the word and sacraments of Christ—
 and we can identify some of the effects of the Reformation—
 having worship and the bible in English,
 weekly communion,
 congregations not bound to the pope,
 and peace to the troubled conscience—
 but still, when we ask whether the Reformation was wise,
 what do we mean?

For some of us, when we look at the terribly broken fellowship of Christians,
 the bloody wars, the bitter words, and the inability to commune at the same altar,
 we're tempted to imagine a world without Luther and his 95 theses.

What if he didn't nail them to the Church door 500 years ago?
 What if Pope Leo X read them, repented, and brought the indulgence controversy to an end?
 What if Luther wasn't so bombastic?
 What if Rome could admit it was wrong?

Today we can only dream of a unified church.
 Here and there we catch glimpses of joy and fellowship, even across denominational lines.
 But it hardly seems possible to glue this fractured church back together,
 let alone restore her to her former beauty.

Maybe that's just the problem: who's to say the Church is splintered, who says it's broken?
 Sure, you look around, and it's clearly a mess—
 not just the fact that you've got Baptists and Pentecostals and Methodists and Lutherans
 and Catholics and Orthodox and loads who'd rather identify as "non-denom,"
 but also because not a single one of these bodies is without the selfish disease of sin.
 We're all infected, even us Missouri Synod Lutherans.

Was it any different before Luther nailed the theses to the Church door?
 Even though the Church appeared to be unified—
 you didn't have a different denomination around every corner—
 was it really?

500 years before the Reformation the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholics split—
 was the church any more unified before than after?

*“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,
 and the violent take it by force.”* (Mt 11:12)

If we think of the Reformation as a break off movement,
 designed to establish itself as the true kingdom of God, to *really* be His Church,
 then all we're doing is playing the flute for those who won't dance.

And if we think of the Reformation as the one thing that broke the camel's back,
 and that has brought such untold disunity to what was an otherwise beautiful whole,
 then we're singing a dirge, and no one's mourning.

The kingdom of heaven comes neither by fasting nor feasting,
 neither by reunification under one communion,
 nor by establishing the true, visible Church on earth.

For the kingdom of heaven doesn't come by our works, one way or the other.

And if anything, that was Luther's greatest preaching: the kingdom of heaven comes in Christ.
 It's gift, not merit; faith, not works.

Luther could neither destroy the Church nor save it.
 He could bring no more disunity than unity.
 For neither are his to give or do; the Church belongs to Christ.

So what are we celebrating today? What is *the Reformation*?

Certainly nothing distinctively Lutheran—
 heaven forbid we distinguish ourselves from the Church of God in Christ!

No, the Reformation isn't about a man nailing 95 theses to a Church door...
 it's about a Man being nailed to a cross.

Anything beyond or above or other than that misses what it's all about.
 The cross of Jesus is the kingdom of God, and the violent *always* take it by force.
 The Church will always suffer, appearing fragmented and broken, no matter what she does—
 whether she fasts with John or drinks with Jesus,
 shares communion with the Pope, or splits under any number of different names—
 for the world will either say she has a demon, or is a drunkard and glutton.

Nevertheless, Wisdom is justified by her deeds.
That is, will the Church remain the Church?
Will sinners repent of their sins and cling to their Savior's word of forgiveness?
Will idols be smashed and the proud humbled and the lowly and forsake raised up?
Will forgiveness for all be proclaimed in the name of Christ,
and will we gather to receive that forgiveness wherever Christ promises to give it?

If so—if Christ still gathers sinners to Himself to receive from Him every good gift—
then the Reformation, whatever it is, can be said to be *wise*.

For Wisdom is justified by her deeds;
and the deeds of the Lord is the justification of man.

And that, dear saints, we have abundantly in Christ.
So on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, do not fear.
Do not fear the disunity you see or the violence always being done to Christ's Church.
For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.
And you will be justified in Him.

In the name of the Father, and of the T Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.