

October 8, 2017

SOLAS: Reformed and Reforming

Rev. Dr. John Ross

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-10

The day was May 26, and the year was 1521. This is the Edict or Worms by Emperor Charles V:

For this reason we forbid any one from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves to be brought personally before us or secured or guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

The Edict from 1521. The Edict of Worms came out of the diet of worms, which is not a weight loss program. It was a gathering, a specific gathering of Catholic leadership in that time and in the city of Worms, stating publicly what they were going to do with this upstart Martin Luther and the trouble he'd been causing for about the last four years or so. What could he possibly have done to deserve an edict like this command against him from the power of Rome? Well, this edict was not the end of the story, nor was it technically the start of the story. It actually all started on October 31 of 1517, five Hundred years ago from this month, and I would submit to you that since the day of resurrection itself, no single day has had quite the same impact on the Church as we know it as did that day.

The SOLAS sermon series that we're launching this morning is on the occasion of this 500 year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Our structure will be the five core statements of doctrine that resulted from the reformation, sola meaning only or sola meaning alone. We're going to spend three weeks coming up, taking two of those next week - Solas fita and solas gratia, grace only and faith alone, and the week after that Solus Christus, and we'll conclude this month on reformation Sunday by dealing with Solas Scriptura, which is probably the most important of the SOLAS for the true reformers, and then on All Saints Sunday, it will be solely Deo Gloria as we hear testimony on All-Saints Sunday, testimonies from the priesthood of all believers.

So, this is the architecture of what's to come in this month. Today, we're going to start in Ephesians 2, probably the best place in scripture that we can start with a series about the Protestant Reformation. This passage speaks to the core issue of the Reformation, the core issue being this: How do we get right with God? How are we set right with the God of the Universe? You'll hear the word "saved," how are we saved? In this passage and other passages this word saved tends to be a little loaded for me. I'm intentionally not using it. I'm suggesting the question is: How are we set right with God?

So, listen now to a passage from Ephesians 2. Listen for the word that God has for you.

(Mary Ann Mead reads Ephesians 2:4-10.)

This morning, to set up these next few weeks of these SOLAS explorations, I'm just going to go in two directions. I want to talk about what it means to be reformed and reforming, both of those things for just a few minutes this morning, but let's begin with prayer. Let us bow together. Gracious and loving God, five hundred years have come and gone since your church changed, and we know that you've been in every moment ever since, and we know that you are in this moment right now. So, we pray just this: As a gift of your Spirit shine your light. Shine your light that we might see clearly, walk nearly and love dearly. Amen.

So, just two directions this morning: Embrace what it is to be enlightened, to know where you are and tell the truth about it. I want to talk about what it means to be reformed and reforming. So, first, a little statement about who we are as a reformed people - I mean you and me and this church together – for just a moment. It means a brief history lesson, history and polity, and if you want more than what I'm going to do in the next two or three minutes, you can enroll in seminary and sign up for The United Church of Christ History and Polity course. Okay?

But just for a couple of minutes, a real brief history of us as reformed people. Wayzata Community church, as a congregation, is 136 years old. It was founded on May 18, 1881, as the Congregational Church of Wayzata, a different name than we bear now, and a different vision than it held back then. Back then the vision was to bring civilization back to the wicked village of Wayzata. Isn't that a dandy? That's where we began. About 76 years later, in the year 1957, we became Wayzata Community Church because our affiliation changed. The Congregational Churches across America merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches from all around the country. Now, interestingly, the Evangelical and Reformed Churches were the result of a merger that had happened between the Evangelical Church and the German Reformed Church. So, now, we've got all kinds of people coming together, but we are now under the umbrella that we call, since 1957, the United Church of Christ. Now the "r" in the e and r part of the formula, reformed, means that we are fully protestant. It means that we are not part of the Holy Roman Catholic Church or any other orthodox expression of the Church, but we are a stand-alone, autonomous expression of Christ's ministry that no one person, be it a Pope or other speaks for us.

Now, along the way, the United Church of Christ has done some things to clarify what its role, then, is. If it's not to speak for us from this highest level up above, like the Pope in the Catholic Church, what is the role of the UCC? Simply this: at the highest level, the national gathering of the United Church of Christ speaks "to" the local church but never "for" the local church. Do you get that? A really important distinction in our tradition, part of what it means to be reformed is that the national church speaks to us and not for us. That's the "R" part, the reformed part of our history.

The Congregational part of our history means that we are highly relational, that we depend and believe very deeply in a covenant that we share. We are not contractually bound to one another in some legalistic way. We've promised to be together through thick and thin – in times of joy and in times of sadness and in every chapter of life. And there's something really beautiful about that, to be in covenant with one another. We've promised to be one another, and John Robinson is one of those famous names out of the past of the congregational history, one of the pilgrims on and near the Mayflower, it was John Robinson who said, "I am verily persuaded that the Lord hath more truth and light to bring forth from his Holy Word." From the inception of our tradition, we believe that God is still speaking. That's part of what it means to

be reformed. And our denomination now, the United Church of Christ, the combination of all, that has very publicly stated that we believe God is still speaking. They even embrace, by kissing the culture a little bit, the words of Gracie Allen, who once said that “we should never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

So, to be reformed has something to do with all of us together, but it’s more than that. To be reformed is not just a denominational thing, and it’s certainly not a Lutheran thing, and I have to be really careful now because I know I’m in the mother land of Lutherans, at least in America. I know there are more Lutherans than people in Minnesota. So, I have to watch where I step here for a few minutes. It’s not just a denominational thing. It’s not just a Lutheran thing. It’s a Jesus thing to be reformed. To be sure, Luther kind of got this whole thing started – right? – with some courage and discernment and with some help from a little bit of technology. I’ll get to that in a minute. Luther sort of started this thing, but Luther took his call and took the page right out of Jesus’ playbook. Tom Rassiour, a noted historian, said “one man, Martin Luther, took a stand that literally shredded the fabric of Europe. It change theology. It changed politics. It changed society, and it changed political boundaries forever.” And more or less that’s true, but once again, Luther got the model of reformation from Jesus. The Reformation is a Jesus thing religiously speaking and spiritually speaking.

Now, before I unpack that, I’m going to interrupt this sermon for an important program note. Next Sunday, and for the following three Sundays, between services, we’re going to have a little TED Talk out in Founder’s Hall. At 10:15, for four weeks in a row, Rustin Comer or one of us clergy are going to stand up on a table out in Founder’s Hall, and we’re going to do fifteen minutes on one of the famous reformers. Next week, at 10:15 in Founder’s Hall. So, just come a little early for the 10:45 service, and hear a fifteen minute deep dive on Martin Luther and the uniqueness of this character in history.

Now, setting Luther aside, remember reformation is a Jesus thing. Religiously speaking, Jesus said over and over again, “You have heard it said, but now I say . . .” (The Greek words are **nuni vu**. It means, “but now”). “You have heard it said,’ Jesus said dozens of times. “You have heard it said, but now I say. . . “ And what followed was reformation, reforming, religiously and spiritually. Jesus, and John before him, preached a perpetual message of repentance.

An authority of the Reformation, friend of this congregation, and personal friend of Chuck and Adrienne Morrison, Martin Marty, with this book clarifies Christ’s position as it relates to reformation. He says, “Repentance, then, rather than being only the practice of imprisoned criminals or people who isolate themselves in cells out in the desert or those who compete with others to be virtuosos of gloom, crabby misfits in society or celebrities caught in a scandal who have to admit a mistake in public, repentance is a response to the promises of God, of grace. The Biblical words for repenting, we recall always involve a turning, an about face, a basic change.” Reformation, at the heart and soul level, not just an institution or collective level, reformation and being reformed is a Jesus thing, Jesus, who didn’t come to start a religion, but to inspire a way of life, not just Sunday morning or Wednesday night but a way of living.

We are reformed. My friends, that’s just as clear as I can be about it. That’s a moment of enlightenment – knowing where we are and telling the truth about it, and that shouldn’t really shock anybody in here, but it seemed an important place to start, that we are, Wayzata

Community Church, you and I together are reformed. But more importantly, I want to say today that we are also reforming, that we are about the business of reforming.

As I said, the United Church of Christ has embraced the idea that God is still speaking and has spoken those words to us – not necessarily for us but to us – that God is still speaking. I sure hope so. I sure hope so because our world is ever changing and I need a word from God every day of my life. I hope and pray that God is still speaking because our world, with a capital W, and my own little world, underneath the roof of my house with Sheila and Brady and Madeleine, Anne Marie and Logan, my little world, is changing every day, and I need a word from God every day. If God is still speaking, then indeed we are still reforming because not only our world is every changing, but look at this: our technology is every changing, human needs are ever changing, our culture is ever changing, and we need a word from God about that.

Seems to me that reformation happens at the intersection of faith and technology. Reformation happens at the intersection of faith and technology. That might surprise you a little bit about that issue of technology coming into play in this conversation, but what was happening five hundred years ago? The printing press. We were right in the middle of the first ever change in how we communicate as human beings. We were right in the middle 500 years ago of going from being entirely oral and gathering around camp fires to share our stories or maybe hand writing them out to being able to mass produce them, to crank those things out, not four or five at a time but four or five hundred at a time. And getting the word out there, that was the technology five hundred years ago.

Right now, today, five hundred years later, we're in the second transition of human communication, from the literate or printed communication, to electronic. Anybody have a cell phone? Yeah, that's when you're all supposed to raise your hands. Okay. Maybe some of you don't. You know. I don't think we have a handle yet on how significant this transition is and will be in the long trajectory of history. I think the fact that we all have more computing power in our pockets or purse right now than an entire building could have contained just 30 years ago, I don't think we have a handle on how significant that change will prove to be over time, but I do know that reformation happens at the intersection of faith and technology, when, like Luther, we use technology to our benefit and to the benefit of our message of God's love for all of creation, in Christ, by faith, through grace.

It happens at the intersection of faith and technology. It also happens at the intersection of faith and human need. Reformation happens at the intersection of faith and human need. We're celebrating the five hundredth anniversary – right? – the five hundredth birthday of the Reformation, but do you know what today is? Today is the fifth birthday of our Parables Ministry, a ministry that's breaking out right now in our chapel, and I promise you the Holy Spirit is in that room. If you're looking to avoid the Holy Spirit, you better avoid Parables, but if you want a full-on straight dose of the Holy Spirit next Sunday, walk into that chapel at 10:30 AM. I promise you the Spirit of God will be in there. Reformation is breaking out in that place, the intersection of faith and human need. Do you know that nine out of ten families with children who have special needs stop going to church? Let me say that again. Nine out of ten families with children with special needs stop going to church, and there are plenty of reasons why they do it, but there weren't enough reasons to keep a few people in this place from reaching out with faith at the intersection of human need and offering a new promise for families who so desperately wanted it and need it. Luther himself was faced with human need in the abuses of

the Church of his day, which is why he stood up in the first place. Now, we all know that Jesus was at his finest at the intersection of faith and human need.

There's one last place where reformation happens that convinces me that we are reformed and reforming, and that is that reformation happens at the intersection of faith and culture. Last Monday morning, like all of you, I woke up to another horrific scene of murder and mass shooting. I have to confess that the shock I felt dissipated quickly which is a sad commentary on how accustomed to this kind of violence we've all become. My shock gave way first to grief knowing there would be families that would endure unspeakable pain and loss. That grief gave way quickly to the fear I felt in my gut when I heard my kids beginning to stir in the house and being well aware of the fact that I was not going to be able to shield them from this evil. That fear, then, gave way as it would to anyone to just raw anger. Furious anger

What you might not know about me if you're only here on Sundays and Wednesday nights, I've got a pretty bad temper. I do, and that temper often takes me places I wouldn't choose to go. So, I was profoundly thankful on Monday morning that, in some way I still don't fully understand, God gave me a moment pause and calm to reflect more deeply on what I was experiencing in that moment, and I want to share with you a week's long work of discernment and prayer and conversation with people that I know who love me and trust me and whom I love and trust. I want to speak to you of the role of clergy and lay leaders. I want to speak to you of my role, not because I occupy the role of senior minister right now, but because there always has been a senior minister in this church and there likely always will be, and there will always be lay leaders. So, it not about me, and it's not about you. It's about the relationship that we have with one another, which is congregational and reformed in and of itself.

And what I want to tell you is that I've come to a point of clarification, particularly at the intersection of faith and culture and in the context of this speed of change. And in the aftermath of unimaginable events, here is what I have discerned to be my role as your senior minister. First and foremost, my role is to absorb pain and not inflict it, to hold the collective pain of this congregation to the very best of my ability and to never inflict more harm by anything that I would say, anything I would do. Secondly, my role is to invite dialogue, rather than incite debate, to be a center of thoughtful theological reflection on the culture around us, not to contribute to conflict that only seeks to divide, and lastly, thirdly, to just ask the simple but profound question: What would Jesus do? And know that the answer to that question will never be as simple that it can be printed on a bracelet. Absorb pain, not inflict it. Invite dialogue, not incite debate, and ask the question: What would Jesus do?

I won't use this pulpit or our video cameras, my lap top or my pen to bully anyone in a one-way monologue that leaves no room for conversation. I won't violate our covenant with one another by putting us on uneven ground by doing any of that. I won't go against the very soul of the reformation that we're proclaiming this whole month by going against the priesthood of all believers but instead holding that all intention, and if any of that makes me sound like a wimpy, non-profit preacher that's got nothing to say, then I apologize in advance, and you and I can have some words at a different time and place, but this is who I am, and this is how I intend to be your pastor, especially at the intersection of faith and culture.

That's my role. What's yours? That's my role, my voice. What's your role? What's your voice?

Reformed and reforming. I don't know that. Only you know that, but I do know this much. I know that whatever it meant to be reforming in 1517, and the resulting divisions that came of it, to be reformed and reforming in 2017 is going to require our coming together, not our being torn apart. This will be my prayer: For my remaining days in this congregation, that is so well positioned to show the world what it looks like to come together across difference, rather than hold each other at arm's length, to embrace the truth that to be reformed means that you are always reforming, to hear the voice of a God who is still speaking, to do what each of us is called to do in responding to that voice.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we're thankful for the chance to be together, to do our best to state the truth about where we are and where we're going and know that we're in it together, and we're in it with you. The blessing that is before us in learning from our own history and for the promises of the future that is before us and is so bright and beautiful, we give thanks in the name of the risen and reigning Christ, even Jesus. Amen.