

October 30, 2016 Reformation Sunday, Confirmation Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you, Beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace, and even more grace. Amen.

Two weeks back, I met one of our confirmands, Stella, at her neighborhood coffee shop called Sister Sludge, in south Minneapolis.

As we read through the early drafts of her faith statement, and talked about today, this Sunday,

I filled her in on our plans to write in her Confirmation Bible,

underlining favorite verses, circling stories, maybe even making illustrations,

I mean, who knows where this could go and how a crew like ours could relish freedom!

Then I took a deep breath, and asked, “What do you think?” knowing full well it was too late, we’d already begun, already broken out the marking pens, “What do you think about us marking up your bible?”

And Stella exclaimed, “I love it, that’s awesome. Then it’s not pristine and clean, like it might break.”

And then I began thinking about what it means to be durable, or more precisely, to recognize God’s word as durable, and similarly, to recognize our God-given faith, as durable.

Isn’t that a message we all need to hear and underline? **God’s love for you, for our world, is durable, it can weather the storms, it can handle the questions, it can bear the grief and the hope?**

In Jeremiah, in the midst of a book written for a suffering people, the prophet offers durable hope:

There will be a new covenant, a new promise.

It won’t be like the old covenant...I will write it on their hearts, I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Did you hear that? There is a flexibility, a re-forming of how God relates to the people.

Before our attempts at reforming, before Martin Luther, God is a reformer and we just get swept up in it.

In the Gospel for today, in the translation we heard,

John declares, “If you continue in my word, you will be my disciples.”

That word we read as Continue is actually the Greek word *meno*; it shows up a few times in this passage.

It’s better translated as remain, or dwell, or abide: If you remain in my word. The Son remains in the house, and has a place there forever. It’s all about relationship, durable, ongoing, relationship.

Today is Reformation Sunday: *Christ makes us free!* That’s a durable promise.

Christ makes us free. Not what we do, or what we say; Not the good works of our labors.

But rather the way by God’s grace we are laced together, to our God, and to one another.

We aren't bound to the past; we're not slaves to our fretting over the future. *Christ makes us free.*
Free to love and to be loved. Free to try and fail and to try again. Free to act for good, for justice.

Contrary to the propaganda of the church of Martin Luther's time in the 1500s, contrary to the popular theology of our time, this grace is real, it's durable, it's relational.

By that durable, God-given faith we're first justified.

This doesn't mean we just sit back as God's chosen ones.

Rather, it compels us to live in and into freedom, to respond in love, in action.

Dear ones, we are reformation people, reformed, and still re-forming.

When our gospel core becomes fuzzy, when we let the fringe drive the center, when we become slaves to the way it's "supposed" to be, or the way it's always been, then we are called again to reformation: to being re-formed, re-shaped, re-newed in the promises of God's durable grace, *Christ makes us free.* Let me draw out a few places where I see this durable re-forming work of God.

First, we are beginning a year of celebration surrounding the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

Tomorrow morning our time, in the cathedral in Lund, in Sweden, Pope Francis and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, will together hold a prayer service.

After centuries of mistrust, recent decades of dialogue led to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, back in 1999, and another agreement this summer called the Declaration On the Way, about continued unity between Catholics and Lutherans.

These open the door for such a prayer service in Lund, and services around the world, over the next year. I wonder how we'll strengthen our ministry and relationship with our neighbors at St. Lawrence?

Scholar Diana Butler Bass writes of these great waves of reformation that occur every 500 or so years. Your math is correct. Many would say that the changes we're now experiencing in the church—changes that so often cause hand-wringing and worry—are simply part of this reforming cycle.

Christ makes us free. That promise is durable, it's real, it's relational.

That's been one of the many blessings I've experienced with Dr. Ibrahim Bitrus with us this October.

Through Ibrahim and his family, we've had a window into the ministry and life of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, and they've had window into the church here.

The church will change as the world changes.

The beauty is how God's durable word, that promise of a durable faith, draws us closer to our Gospel core, than farther.

A week ago, on campus, the Lutheran Campus Ministry leaders hauled a door over to Coffman.

They gave those passing by a chance to quote "nail it to the door," *a la* Martin Luther,

with a pile of post it notes, and big, open ended, reforming prompts like: **My hopes for the church are... I've been hurt by the church because... and, My experience with God is...**

Questions like these imply both a durability and a trust.

They get people talking, right there by Coffman, talking about faith, subtly aware of Reformation.

It's a similar talking about faith that we seek in our homes, around our tables, at our meetings.

Monty, our Congregational Faith Formation Coach rocks the boat, this morning

inviting us not only to hear the word but to talk about it, together, with the person next to us.

Have you tried using Faith5 at home or with friends? It's not just for kids and families, but really anyone.

At our house we're doing it at supper a few nights a week, sharing highs and lows, sometimes reading from

the bible, usually praying, often blessing one another, marking the cross on one another's forehead.

A three year old's little fingers tracing that cross, telling me again I am a child of God, powerful, durable.

It's for a durable faith that we pray for Stella and Brinnen today as they Affirm their Baptisms, say YES to the promises God made in baptism.

Last Sunday you heard their statements of faith, a snap shot in time, filled with honesty, trust, questions.

Do they have it all figured out? No, they don't. And neither do we. And, that's okay.

Christ makes us free, that's the promise of this day, that's the love that roots and claims us.

That's the core that compels our action.

In these changing times, may we know again the God who writes (indeed underlines with bright marking pens), the God writes the promises on our hearts, and in our lives.

Christ makes us free.

Thanks be to God for the durable love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.