

October 29, 2017, Reformation Sunday (Confirmation, New Members)

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalms 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Reference: The Art of Relevance, Nina Simon, TEDxPalo Alto, 4/27/17

Beloved of Christ, Christ's very own, Grace and Peace to you.

Doors matter.

They mattered back in October 1517.

And doors matter today.

They call the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz the MAH.

In a TED Talk, the MAH's Executive Director, Nina Simon, speaks about relevance, and about meaning, and about doors.

She tells the story of the Museum of Art and History figuring out how to have relevance:

How after 20-some years of existence, more folks in Santa Cruz knew the building as the former county jail, than knew it as the Museum of Art and History.

It was one of the librarians in our congregation that passed this TED Talk my way.

She said that it had been getting a lot of conversation in the library circles in which she runs.

It seems that libraries, like museums, like—dare I say—churches, must ask these vital questions of relevance, questions about doors.

What does it matter?

With the church, how does this living gospel, this practice of faith, this moral deliberation, this community of action, this embodiment of Jesus' very own body and blood... matter?

What makes it relevant? What makes us relevant?

After 500 years as Lutheran Christians, after 2000 years as followers of Jesus, how do people know us?

Our message? Our God? Our relevance?

And that's where doors matter.

The traditional story goes that on October 31st, 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the doors of the castle church, All Saints' Church, in Wittenberg, in Germany.

Luther, it seems, was using this public space to share his opposition to the selling of indulgences.

In that posting and in the years of debate that followed,

Luther and the other reformers called the church back to its center and back Paul's writings:

We are justified by grace, he said.

It's a gift, a free gift of faith, not earned, not bought like an indulgence, but freely given,

a gift of the Holy Spirit that in turn enlivens us

for loving our neighbors and caring for God's creation.

A free gift of grace.

Instead of anxious and tangled hearts, we can trust the promise of forgiveness.

Instead of fearing that the church would be corrupted by the world, we can engage the world's needs.

Instead of avoiding the messy, pain of life, God meets us in that crux where death and life interweave.

At the MAH, the Museum of Art and History, Nina and her community focused on the doors:

the literal doors where people enter the museum

and the figurative doors, the doors of meaning and culture and assumption.

They realized that they didn't just have to open the "existing doors wider," but that they needed "new doors, new people, new ways," indeed in their case, a whole new entrance that is neon pink.

They did some deep and close listening to those who hadn't often or ever entered their doors.

They asked questions of meaning and value, and they took the museum beyond its physical doors:

to the beach, to the city center, to the bars, into the cultures and communities woven into Santa Cruz... they made the MAH relevant and real.

The risk in celebrating 500 years of the Reformation is a crook in our neck from looking backward.

Over these last 500 years, sometimes the church has gotten things very right,

we've acted on our beliefs, we've spoken as Jesus would have us speak.

Other times we've made mistakes and caused undue pain, even hatred and death.

Too often we failed to act at all, mired in complicity.

At this 500th year, I pray we can celebrate the best of our faith and our tradition,

that we can confess what needs confessing, our failings,

and that most of all we can look to year 501 and 502 and 550 with a sense of spaciousness and trust, energy, hope, creativity, indeed the promises that God is still writing a new covenant on our hearts.

We are still reforming.

Last Sunday Nicke, Josh, Ian, and Jazmyne shared their statements of faith.

They leaned into that sense of belonging and in their unique voices and perspectives they were witnesses of God: telling stories, asking questions, leading us in song, and claiming what they value. This morning they will be confirmed, professing their own space of belonging and responsibility in this faithful community, in God's church.

This morning we also welcome 23 new members.

Over these last months I've enjoyed getting to know each of them—they are eager to be part of this faithful community.

We seek a community that at once supports us in our walk of faith and that calls us to be more of who Christ created us to be, day to day, here in this place, and far beyond.

In all innocence people will ask (as they should):

Why do we do it this way?

Why not try it that way?

What if a door was over here?

Oh, look, come and see, don't you see God is active right here, and over there, and there, too?

We are still reforming,

still hearing the sweet voice of the Spirit,

still listening closely, deeply to the ways that God is active around us,

still heeding the call for a door over here, and one over there,

still humbly, boldly claiming the freedom of Christ.

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

As we enter this 501st year,

may our doors swing wide,

may our walls be porous,

and may Christ's freedom root us in relevance and claim us in love.

For Christ has set us free. Thanks be to God. Amen.