

October 25, 2020 Reformation 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.

Hear again the word of the Lord, spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“I will put my law within them,
I will write it on their hearts;
I will be their God...and they shall be my people.”

Today, dear ones, is Reformation Sunday.

We remember our namesake Martin Luther, and a cadre of other reformers from the 16th century:

John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli and many, many more.

Through their writing, their preaching, their teaching—really, by the Holy Spirit’s power—the reforming movements began, change happened.

Luther leaned into Paul’s words from the letter to the Romans,

We are justified by grace as a gift.

That same Holy Spirit is active still, calling us again and again, back to these core truths:

to this gift at our very heart,
to these deep-in-our-bones promises.

Re-forming us!

Counter to our culture, contrary to our own inclinations and our deepest fears:

We are not justified by our good works.

We are not made right before God because of what we do.

Oh that’s big, I’ll say it again: We’re not made right before God because of what we do.

Rather, what we do **flows from** this gift of grace, from this free gift of grace from our merciful Savior.

Without any fanfare, home-sewn out of necessity, I’ve been keenly aware of the Holy Spirit these last months.

She’s been up to her reforming ways, even (especially) in this time of crisis:

Re-centering us on the gospel’s power for life in the midst of death,

Sustaining us with surprising energy and openness to change, even in our deep fatigue and anxiety,

Gathering us up, like right now, making a space for beauty in incredibly painful times,

Igniting us for justice, especially racial and systemic justice, that our Brown and Black and Indigenous siblings have longed for, called for, over decades, really, over centuries.

We are not the same as we were in March, the church is not the same.

We are being re-formed, re-newed, called back again to these core truths:

to this gift at our very heart,

to these deep-in-our-bones promises. Let us add an Amen!

Not only is today Reformation Sunday, but it is also Confirmation Sunday.

Yes, Confirmation Sunday: On Zoom. Via the livestream, through the power of technology.

Exceptional times call for exceptional measures.

We've got three awesome confirmands today—M'taleni Nashandi, Seneca Brooks, and Poonam Morgan.

For more than two years they've studied the Bible and the Catechism.

They've picked mentors and gone deep in conversation with them.

They've explored what it means to be Lutheran, and more widely Christian, in a multi-faith world, in this time filled with so much flux, on the edge over everything.

They've experienced faith practices and grappled with hard questions and big issues.

They've eaten together, served together, cried together, prayed together, laughed together.

It's traditional to give Bibles to students when they're Confirmed.

In recent years we began not simply giving pristine, yet-to-be-opened Bibles, but rather marked up bibles:

bibles that had been held and blessed, where we'd taken the liberty to underline favorite passages and doodle and circle, with hopes for more to come.

This year we reformed our practice a bit for safety: we didn't pass them around to the whole congregation.

But all the verses that the congregation and friends and family shared have been marked in the bibles.

We also collected videos with you sharing your favorite scripture, and why.

You told us of how God is creating us anew, calling us to produce good fruit,

how Jesus' welcomes us home, loves us fiercely,

how even as everything is changing, God's love is steadfast.

Poonam and Seneca and M'taleni have their Bibles now, with them at home today, a gift from this congregation.

Last Sunday they came together here in the sanctuary at church, wearing masks, keeping distance, donning the traditional confirmation gowns, inviting their families, their mentors, a few other leaders.

That day we recorded their faith statements—statements you'll get to hear in a few minutes.

After each student shared the whole group responded to what we heard,

noticing what God is doing in them, through them,

their vulnerability, the way they are models, examples of faithful living.
It was deeply moving...for all of us.
We also shared Holy Communion, and the group had some time for pictures, and closure.

As we share the faith statements now, we'll intersperse the song Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying.

That simple song became a go to for this group.

In typical times, at the end of each of our mini retreats, we'd move to either the chapel or the sanctuary.

We'd stand in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, around the baptismal font, fingers or hands in the water,

first singing,

then praying together—these three became great prayers!

then marking a watery blessing on one another's foreheads: Remember that you are a child of God.

"I will put my law within them," God says through Jeremiah so, so long ago, and still today

"I will write it on their hearts;

I will be their God...and they shall be my people."

Dearly beloved:

May grace claim you, again.

May freedom hold you, anew.

May this gift keep you, reform you, sustain you, forever. Amen.