

October 31, 2021 Reformation Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

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

[Martin Luther King, Jr. <https://lisasingh.com/southeast-travel/martin-luther-kings-defining-moment-a-kitchen-in-montgomery-alabama-past-midnight/>; Rev. Jeff Johnson on October 23, 2021 quoting Joel Workin; Overwhelm: Not a Problem to be solved, October 12, 2021, Susan Beaumont, <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/overwhelm-not-a-problem-to-be-solved/>]

Grace, pure grace, to you beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

So if Jesus makes you free, you are free indeed.

It is Reformation Sunday.

And you are looking lovely in red.

504 years ago, on this very date, our namesake, Martin Luther, began a debate.

It wasn't intended to become a movement, a protest, indeed, the Protestant movement.

It wasn't planned to create seismic shifts in the shape of the Christian Church or Western history

... but it did.

It began as discussion about the selling of indulgences,

about how eternal life is achieved

and the questionable practices of the Roman Catholic church of the time.

Martin Luther was a monk, a priest,

a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany.

He was raising questions of his own tradition, poking-the-the-bear, if you will.

Does our grace, our salvation come as a spiritual gift of faith, an act of Christ?

Or is it something that must be confessed, earned, or even paid for?

Making his case, Professor Luther went back to Paul's letters to the people of Rome

and to other scripture:

We all fall short of the glory of God, but Grace is a gift, a free gift, not earned.

It's from this place of Grace that we respond, that we live.

Grace comes first.

Let me say that again: Grace comes first.

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 freedom at the very crux where death and life meet.

Can I get an Amen?

Beloved ones, if Jesus makes you free, you are free indeed.

So I could go on and on about Martin Luther and his compatriots of the time.

That's one way to celebrate the Festival of the Reformation:

by looking back 500-some years.

And there is much to celebrate.

But today, this Reformation Sunday, let us widen the view and celebrate the Holy Spirit's reforming movement in the church and in the world then and now:

She stirred with the winds at creation.

She midwived for courageous Mary singing of justice and the fire of the new dawn.

She blew through the city at Pentecost,

and inspired Martin Luther to stand.

Through the centuries, it was the Holy Spirit who whispered to another Martin,

Martin Luther King, Jr. at the kitchen table, that inner voice saying

"Stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Stand up for righteousness."

Oh, she's a reformer: The Holy Spirit isn't done with us yet.

And that, dear friends, is good news this Reformation morning.

If the Reformation has taught us anything, I pray in our bones, in our very DNA,

there is an openness to reform,

to being shaped and reshaped, sometimes willingly, sometimes not,

but always with the trust that the Holy Spirit is alive and active.

This Reformation Sunday, let me share some stories of the Holy Spirit's reforming:

Last Saturday, I returned from an MEA trip to Chicago, by way of Decorah, Iowa.

Why Decorah? you ask.

I couldn't resist being part of an ordination for a good friend and colleague, Amalia Vagts.

It was a glorious day.

For years, Amalia has been a leader in a Lutheran movement called Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries.

Decades before the ELCA finally voted to change its policy to make a space for queer LGBTQ leaders,

pastors, deacons, in the church,

the Holy Spirit was moving in congregations and leaders, making a space for us,
tugging, nudging, inspiring, bolstering, indeed, reforming
Hope has been part of this reforming movement for many of these decades.
In these pandemic days, it was so, so moving to worship together.
to share Holy Communion,
to see these companions in a movement that has consumed nearly all of my adult life.
One our colleagues ordained back in 1990, Jeff Johnson, preached at Amalia's ordination.
In his sermon, Jeff recalled the words of a beloved saint who died much too young early in the the
continuing AIDS epidemic, Joel Workin.
Joel said: "The greatest gift God gives us in the grace to be ourselves."
The grace to be ourselves.
Let that be good news this Reformation Sunday.

Here's another reformation story:

In 2018 our congregation joined eight other local faith communities in receiving a grant and
commissioning a new **expansive language Lutheran liturgy**.

We sought more and richer images for God and the Bible is full of them!

We found poets, theologians, pastors, and musicians from diverse experiences to create this liturgy.

This new liturgy will widen, and expand, how we worship,

and thereby reforms how we as a community show up in the world.

On Monday our group met to review the nearly complete draft of the liturgy.

I'm happy to report that it's beautiful, singable, evocative, grace-filled, and I pray it just might get into our
bones—that's been one of my goals!

They'll make a few more tweaks and then we'll test the liturgy by using it in congregations this winter.

Hope will be one of these test sites and I am so excited to share this with you.

And another story:

Early in October Ann Agrimson and Tim Gustafson hosted a new member gathering in their backyard.

New members and those who've been here a while sat around their fire pit on a beautiful Saturday morning.

We told stories and then more stories, sharing how we've come to this faith community:

What has been your geographic journey to this community?

telling of immigration and moves and grad school and student visas and those we love spread
literally around the world.

And what has been your spiritual journey to this community? recalling the saints who've gone before us,
and the questions that just wouldn't let us go, and how God's grace has made a way.

It was rich, moving, one of those times when world history and politics and our own lived experience
coalesces.... and the Holy Spirit doesn't leave us the same.

Over these last weeks I've been hearing from many of you and sensing in myself something I can simply
call Overwhelm.

A piece caught my attention recently, by Susan Beaumont who writes about leadership.

She told of meeting with people who were describing their current feeling of Overwhelm.

So much has happened.

The decisions can seem impossible and never-ending.

As Susan listened, they'd muse about the demands they are juggling and the problems to be solved.

Susan, wrote, Finally "they get to the heart of the matter: [saying] 'I am failing. A better person would be
able to handle all of this.' Or 'This system is broken...'"

Of course, if it seems like we or the system is broken,

our natural response is to try and solve the problem,

to fix it,

to solve it,

to restore the balance...

And when we can't, here comes the Overwhelm!

Anyone know that feeling?

Realizing all the uncertainties of this stage in the pandemic,

when race and economics and health and safety and everything else is up in the air,

Susan writes, of this liminal season when

"something has ended, but a new thing is not yet ready to begin."

Right here, right now, like in Luther's Day and all the days in between, there is a place for grace:

When Jesus makes you free, you are free indeed.

No need to solve it all, fix it all, do it all.

Grace comes first.

Dear ones, I'm curious today where you are sensing Reformation?

Where is the Holy Spirit swirling, creating something new?

Where are systems and structures in that liminal space, where something has ended and something new is
not yet clear but surely coming?

Where is there a cry for creativity and imagination?

In these days we can flounder and wear ourselves out in Overwhelm.

Or, with grace we can step aside just a titch, and let the Holy Spirit surprise us with her reforming power.

If Jesus makes you free, you are free indeed.

Say that with me: If Jesus makes you free, you are free indeed.

Through all the uncertainty:

May Jesus' free you.

May grace claim you.

May the Holy Spirit fill you with everything you need.

For in Jesus you are free, free indeed.

Amen.