

**Pentecost 21A, Proper 25. 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation.  
October 29, 2017.**

Today we are marking, more than celebrating, the world-changing movement that kicked off five hundred years ago when a troubled and troublesome German monk nailed 95 questions for debate on a church door. Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517 and the Protestant Reformation—which led to the Catholic Reformation—was born. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and casseroles all owe a great deal to this day. Between them, Luther, those who followed in his wake, and the Roman Catholic Church tore Europe apart and made room for the nation-state to supplant the church as the dominant actor in European life. And between them, they effectively, if temporarily, reformed all of Western Christendom, rooting out longstanding abuses and setting up new dogmatisms, for better or worse.

But you may have noticed a missing denomination in my list above. Ahem. You see, Episcopalians in general aren't at all sure what to make of the Reformation. "Reformation Day" does not appear on our kalendar and I guarantee you that some of my friends are preaching sermons titled "The Reformation: 500 years of a bad idea that had a few good effects." We're spiritually descended from the church of England, where things did go a little differently in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Unlike most Protestant movements, we didn't have one great theologian leading a prince by the nose through a reformation. Our doctrine barely changed, and attempts to change it too much always met with resistance. But for the first three hundred years after the Reformation, most English church people would have unambiguously considered themselves Protestant. Without getting too boring, a really influential theological movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century England convinced many people that the Church of England was a reformed Catholic church, with more in common with the Romans than the Presbyterians. Whether they were right or not when they started to make the argument, their influence was great enough that they were largely right by the time their momentum faded.

So, okay, to do much more on that would be really boring. But my point is that it's a little weird for us to acknowledge this day. There is some question of what the Reformation has to do with us—or at least those of us who aren't recovering Lutherans. Or to put it another way: what claims can the Reformation make on us, besides sending a birthday card up to Good Shepherd Lutheran and a condolence card down to Ascension?

I think we can find a couple things by looking at our scriptures for today, which are just what comes next in the lectionary, and not specially chosen for Reformation Day. We began with the heart-wrenching story of Moses, at the end of his life, seeing the Promised Land he would never enter. It's a sad story, to me. Moses has led his people out of slavery and across the desert. He has delivered the Ten Commandments and talked God out of abandoning God's people. Everything he's done for forty years has been to

bring them here, to the Promised Land, and he cannot go with them. It's sad, but today it presses home to us that the work of becoming the people of God is never finished. It extends beyond even the longest, most hallowed lives.

We may be able one day to lounge back into that deep, satisfied sigh and say "I have done my part." But we cannot lean back and say, "the work is done." In the specific terms of today, we might take the point that the church is always in the process of reforming. We are always still on the path toward what we are called to be. The work of Luther, Moses, Paul, Cranmer, Augustine, Curry, Pusey, Francis are never the final change. God's transformative work among us as a people is never ending.

And then our gospel reading has the great summary of the whole law and the prophets: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." And "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." I hope that we have all heard this before, whether we've ever managed to live it or not. But in today's curious context, it reminds us that change and reform are always to be done in the service of these first principles. We might wish that this or that small thing about a church were different, but what we really hang our hat on is these two commandments: to love God and neighbor.

They are to lie behind our programs and initiatives and mission statements and special events. They are to lie behind our stewardship campaigns and budget-writing processes. And they must be at the heart of every attempt to reform the church. The church is always reforming because we can always grow closer in love to God and our neighbor—and impediments to this love are persistent. Every church, whether Catholic or Protestant or whatever the Episcopal church is or something else, is called to be always reforming, building communities devoted to loving God and our neighbors.