

Sermon 10.30.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Reformation Sunday

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

499 years ago, a priest in the small town of Wittenberg, Germany nailed a piece of paper to the door of the castle church. He had been working on this piece of paper for a *long time*. It was years in the making, maybe decades. He poured his time and his energy into this piece of paper, he sweated over it like a student preparing for a final exam, until *finally* it was ready.

We don't know exactly what the man was hoping to accomplish or achieve by nailing his paper to the door. It may sound like a strange thing to do, but the door of the castle church served as the community bulletin board for the university at which he taught. Perhaps the man was just trying to share his thoughts. Perhaps he was trying to start a conversation. Perhaps he hoped to create change and reform at the highest levels. We don't know.

We don't even know a lot about that day, to be honest. Legend has it that he used a hammer and nail to attach the paper to the door, but we don't know. It's possible he didn't even put it on the door at all, and instead sent it to his superiors by the mail, taking advantage of 16th century FedEx and their incredible ground shipping capabilities. We just don't know.

What we *do* know is that his paper was full of 95 arguments – we call them *theses* – pointing out what this man perceived to be error and issues within the church and its teachings. We know that within an incredibly short amount of time, everyone had heard of his writings, and they had been read by some of the highest levels of leadership within the church. We know that these words written on this paper – maybe nailed to a door, maybe not – began a change,

a shift, a *reformation* that became one of the most important events in history and helped to shape the world. We know that this man's name was Martin Luther.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) And 499 years after Martin Luther wrote his theses and set the world on fire, these words spoken by Jesus are key to understanding Luther's actions. He wrote those words because he discovered that he had been living a lie. A lie that kept him, and countless others, from being truly *free*.

For years, Luther's life had been ruled by this lie. And the lie was this: the church had taken the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and replaced it with human laws and demands and rules. They had exchanged the Gospel for the age-old lie of human effort and self-righteousness. You see, at that time the church taught that life was all about working off your sin, about becoming more perfect and climbing the spiritual ladder towards God. When you committed a sin, you were told exactly what *you* needed to do so you could move from a state of sin back into a state of grace. People went to incredible lengths to try to secure their own salvation and work towards heaven. They entered monasteries to become more holy. They traveled for miles to see religious relics – like the wood in Wittenberg that was supposedly a part of Jesus' crib – to become more holy. They were told if they made financial contributions to the church, purchasing things called *indulgences*, it would help them get into heaven more quickly. These were all things that people could do to ensure and secure their own salvation.

And Martin Luther was haunted by one question: how can I be sure I've done enough?

Martin Luther was a worrier, and he was honest. He knew exactly what kind of person he was. He knew that he wasn't even aware of many of the sins he committed. He questioned if

he had done *enough* penance, whether he had performed *enough* good deeds to be okay. He worried that maybe he had missed a sin, and forgotten to ask for forgiveness. He worried that wasn't really sorry for the wrong he had done, but was only confessing out of fear. He worried that he hadn't prayed long enough, or hard enough, didn't believe strongly enough. So he tried harder and harder, but he was haunted by the fear that he hadn't done *enough*, because he was surrounded by a system that told him his salvation was dependent on *his* actions.

And because Luther was a good pastor, he watched with sorrow as the people in his church struggled too, as they worked harder and harder to be in good standing with God, but just felt more burdened and fearful and worried.

And this led Luther to ask some important questions.

Questions that took him to the Bible. And in the Bible, Luther uncovered the lie for what it was, because he discovered the *truth*. We don't know which passage was like a lightbulb going off above his head. Maybe it was from his favorite book, Galatians. Or the one he borrowed from so much in his writings, Romans. Maybe it was even the passage Gail read this morning, where the lie and the truth are revealed in these simple words: "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works.*" (Romans 3)

These words expose the lie that we must or even are *able to earn* God's favor and forgiveness and *obtain* righteousness through our own actions. And they reveal the glorious truth that by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven by God. We are loved by God. We are made right with God. We are declared holy and righteous by God. And we are set

free from sin and death and shame and fear by God. It's a gift of grace, freely given to us, which we trust in faith. If you hear nothing else today, then hear *that*, that through Jesus God offers you love and forgiveness and grace freely as a gift, and never as a reward that you need to earn. This is the truth that set Martin Luther free from his endless efforts to earn righteousness and do enough to get God's favor, and it's the same truth that sets us free today.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day each year when we celebrate the Reformation. But here's the big secret: we're not really celebrating events that took place 499 years ago, and we're not really celebrating Martin Luther. We're celebrating that God is *always* creating change and reform. Reformation isn't just something that happened, it's a way of living. God is constantly at work re-shaping, and re-making, and re-forming not just the church, but each of us, every day. And this is good news, because we need it!

There is something within us – which we Christians call *sin* and which Martin Luther liked to call the “Old Adam” – that has a tendency to seek out things that pull us away from God and abundant life and caring for one another and the creation that God has made.

And one of the most amazing things about God is that he's always at work re-forming us, calling us back from sinful things, and making us new. The reformation isn't over, because none of us have it all *right*. None of us are finished products. God's not done working in us yet, not as individuals, and not as a church. And Reformation Sunday is a day for us to look within, to consider how we as a church and you as a person are in need of being re-formed by God.

This isn't an easy thing to do. The truth is sometimes hard to face, and often it's much easier to live with a lie than admit something that might force us to change or grow. The truth-

telling business is hard, as both Jesus and Martin Luther can tell you. And yet, it is only the truth that brings light and freedom. Never a lie, not even a comfortable one.

It is the *truth* that sets us free.

And so, in light of Martin Luther and his theses, his re-discovery of the truth that sets us free, I thought I might offer a thesis of my own this morning. Because in our world today, there are still many lies passed off as truths that hurt people, and bad news dressed up as good, and fear and anxiety that are weighing people down.

This election season has been insane. Our media has gone into a frenzy. There have been so many lies that it's hard to know the truth. We've seen and heard things that we never imagined in a presidential election. And not just from the candidates, also from supporters on both sides who have used foul language, physical violence, dirty tactics, fear-based rhetoric, xenophobia, racism, religious discrimination, misogyny, and hate to vilify and dehumanize other people. Don't get me wrong – some things are worth being angry about, and we need to speak the truth and call a thing what it is, and stand up against injustice and evil wherever we see it at work. But over the past few months, people from all walks of life have claimed the moral high ground with smug superiority while insulting and bashing and hating and even harming those with whom they disagree. As a nation we have forgotten how to see each other as human beings, that we need to listen and learn from one another.

Our country is divided. And some things are worth being divided over. But we're not as divided as some people want to think. And part of why we're so divided is because we've been fed a lie, a lie that we've believed as the truth and which even now holds us captive. The lie is that being a Republican or a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative is the primary thing that

defines us as people. And this lie teaches that we must be right and the other side must be wrong.

But I have to tell you the truth, that God doesn't teach us to draw lines like that or to hate or dehumanize or mock *anyone*. As people who live in this country, we are neighbors and citizens. All of us. Before we're members of political parties, we're members of a society where we belong to each other and where we *need* each other. We're going to need each other on November 9th too, and if we want to create unity and healing and have a chance to come together and honestly address problems in our nation, than we need to stop believing the lie that only serves to further divide.

As Christians, we know a deeper truth. We know that we are all God's children. That we all come to God the same way – broken and in need – and we all receive the same thing – undeserved love and grace. Each person, even the one with whom you disagree entirely on every political issue under the sun, is still a human being made in God's image, which means they have an inherent dignity and value and are worthy of respect. Our identity as followers of Jesus transcends any other identity we may have, it's our *faith* that defines us, and it is Jesus and the coming of his kingdom – not a political party – that is the ultimate hope for our world, for our nation, and for each of us. This is the truth. May knowing it calm our fears, strengthen our faith, increase our decency, and set us free. And if we forget it, then let's nail it to the door. Amen.