

Sermon 10/27/24 Reformation Sunday United Lutheran Eugene “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” says Jesus Christ our Lord. Today is a very important day in the story of our faith, Reformation Sunday. The day where we commemorate the reformation and all of its reformers. It is not a day that we forget about the Gospel to focus on something else, but it is a day where we remember a turning point in the story of our faith, and one of the most influential moments in the renaissance. Not only will we think about the reformation of the past, but I invite you all into thinking about how the church is still actively reforming. We will engage one another in conversations about what it means to be a Lutheran. I hope that together we can also think about what steps we can take now and in future generations to continue to heal our relationships with our Catholic sisters and brothers. Now sit down, buckle up, strap up your helmet and let's enjoy our journey on this time machine.

First stop, Wittenberg, Germany 1517. This is a time where the truth is not what sets you free, in fact you might not even know the truth. Mass is printed in Latin, literacy rates are low, and imagine trying to comprehend Latin in the first place. What was it that set you free, and what did one even become free from? Life in the early 16th century was not easy in Wittenberg. The town was well known for its University, started by the electorate Prince Fredrick the Wise, the institution where reformers Martin Luther and Phillip Melancton were employed as professors. Recently, this new university, and the castle church was built by the prince, and this church hosts a collection of relics on All Saints Day for the masses to flock towards. As good as this sounds, life is no walk in the park. Waves of the plague sweep through the town periodically, proper nutrition and health are afterthoughts, and poverty was high. When life is rough, Jesus is often someone you look towards for relief, but what happens when Jesus isn't viewed in this same way?

In the late middle ages the Catholic Church significantly benefited from spreading fear rather than hope, namely through the concepts of Hell and purgatory. These ideas led people to forget that Jesus was a loving savior, and rather made them believe that he was a wrathful judge of the end times. Let's jump

back a little further to 1321, when Dante's "Divine Comedy" was published. Dante attempted to be like one of the great poets from antiquity, and in his book he took readers on a journey through the afterlife; Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Think about the journey that Ebenezer Scrooge is guided on in the Christmas Carol, like an out of body experience type of journey. The book is essentially fear mongering, especially its horrific descriptions of Hell. As well as its descriptions of purgatory; this middle place, and an idea that had been building up traction for quite some time. The ideas of this book are extremely loosely based on the Christian faith, and that's being generous. Lets call it mythology from both the Christian and Greco-Roman worldview. What happens is this: the terrifying depictions used in this book and others are used to fearmonger the people into trying very hard to avoid a wrathful God. These ideas became so prevalent to the later medieval church, that the people were often afraid of Jesus and forgot who he really was. This book and many others like it were weaponized to spread fear rather than love. How can the truth set you free, when your idea of the truth isn't even something rooted in scripture?

Church leaders quietly began to question whether or not the church was taking the right approach to salvation, but any attempts of change were squashed down quickly. And here is what you might remember from confirmation, or from what your friends told you about their confirmation. Along came Martin Luther, a man who had a flair for the dramatic and according to our romanticized story, he was walking home through a violent storm. The thunder boomed loudly, and the lightning bolts were close to his wretched, scared, trembling soul. Luther prayed to St Anne, patron saint of many things but to Luther she was the patron saint of miners. The occupation his father had. Luther asked for safe delivery from the storm, and in exchange Luther promised to give his life to the servitude of God.

Luther became an Augustinian friar and a professor in Wittenberg. He noticed some issues with the way that the Catholic church was teaching the faith, and their desire for works and payment based salvation. He also noticed that Jesus was not viewed as a loving savior, but as a wrathful judge. The Catholic Church taught that in order for deceased loved ones to not labor away in purgatory forever, that

parishioners needed to give away their funds to the church to lower their amount of years in purgatory. What Luther noticed was that grace was not being taught as a gift from God, but rather something that needed to be earned. And that's your recap from confirmation.

Luther did not recant his statements against the Catholic Church, and was excommunicated from the mother church. Yet he continued to preach, and his movement that started as an effort to change the Catholic Church to remind them of where they had gone astray, had resulted in a new church entirely. To Luther, Jesus wasn't viewed as someone who was out to get you, but rather as someone who loved you and gave you salvation. Luther reminded the church who we were, and pulled sources from the Bible rather than popular mythology to do so. And this is usually where we stop the story. Luther is celebrated as a hero, as a man who trusted in God, and changed the world. But why stop there? Is this where the truth sets us free? To be a separatist movement outside of the confines of Catholicism?

A few months ago I had the pleasure of studying under the Reverend Doctor Dirk Lange, the secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. He was tasked with leading and planning the shared liturgy with Pope Francis on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Something he highlighted to me in our discussions was that the Good News of Christ is pushing us back together, and how important it is to push those boundaries of what separates our churches. The ecumenical direction that the church is heading towards is something that excites me for our future. Although we are a fractured relationship: We are still one church. There are Catholics and Lutherans who worship together, there are Catholics and Lutherans who pray together. And on that day, October 31, 2017 we shared worship with the Pope. This built on a few decades of Catholic-Lutheran dialogue that had one of its biggest moments in 1999. When Lutherans and Catholics came together and signed The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This basically asserted that we both agreed at the highest levels of our church bodies that salvation is not based on works. One of the biggest things that separated us, we are now together in agreement. The fifteenth clause of the declaration states "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any

merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."

This is a living example of the Good News of Jesus Christ. That no matter what we do, however much we give or however little we give, whether we are rich or poor, black or white, Catholic or Lutheran, that we are saved. The Grace of God frees us of eternal damnation, and gone in our minds are the threats of a horrific Hell. Instead we have an eternity of joy to look forward to, where people of every nation, language, and race can come together and worship our God. The Good News is no matter how we live our lives, we join in the fellowship of Christ forever. In this life we don't have to worry about our salvation because God took care of that already. Now with all this extra time we would have spent worrying about our salvation, we can do the works of God. We can lift up the poor, and tend to those in distress, we can feed the hungry, and cloth the naked. And that box outside the church is an example of that. We have joined in mission with St Vincent de Paul's charities with our Catholic friends to help our struggling communities. We are no longer bound by what separates us from other Christians, we are one in the same.

The truth that sets us free is that we are all children of God, and inheritors of God's eternal promise of everlasting life. Jesus frees us from an eternity of pain and suffering and freely welcomes us to everlasting life in his loving arms. A few months before I was born, the Lutherans and Catholics came together on the biggest thing that separated us. So why stop there? There is still much work to be done to repair our broken relationships with our Catholic brothers and sisters, but I dream of a day where I can walk into Catholic mass, share communion, and laugh and cry together as siblings in Christ. On this Reformation Day we honor not our break from the Church, but we look forward to the healing nature of Jesus Christ that allows us to greet one another with open arms. Amen.