

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

What We Celebrate On Reformation Day

At the end of October we celebrated the Lutheran Reformation, a pivotal moment in history that set off in 1517 when Martin Luther spoke openly and honestly about his concerns with the church and its teachings. Luther couldn't have predicted what that honesty would end up meaning for the future of the church, or that 500 years later there would be people worshiping in Pennsylvania who called themselves "Lutherans".

On Reformation Day we celebrate Luther's boldness and the Holy Spirit's stirring among the other reformers who led the church forward into a season of newness and change all those years ago, but first and foremost we give thanks to God for sticking with us, for remaining steadfast with us, even when we mess up, even when we get it wrong, even when it takes us a long time to understand what God's grace is supposed to mean for our worship and daily life.

My husband and I recently had the incredible opportunity to spend our continuing education time in the area of Germany where the Lutheran Reformation began (Wittenberg and the surrounding area). While there we walked streets that the reformers walked, worshiped in churches that they preached in, and prayed in the places they prayed. It felt powerful to be in these same spaces all these years later, reflecting on what came out of these humble towns.

The place that held the most power for me upon visiting was St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg—this was the local church, the one where Martin and Katarina would have worshiped alongside their friends, where they took Holy Communion, where their children were baptized. Their friend, local artist Lucas Cranach (who was also very important to the cause of the Reformation) was responsible for the painting of the altar piece, which focused on themes of the Reformation. I've included a picture of the front of that piece (what you would see from the pews and when coming up for Holy Communion). The themes painted on it are what we give thanks for on Reformation Day, therefore I wanted to share this image with you this week (on Page 4):

On the right a group of local townspeople are gathered around a baptismal font as Philip Melancthon, a reformer and author of the Augsburg Confession (the theological root of our Lutheran teaching), baptizes a baby. This is where our experience of God's grace begins—in the undeserved, unearned, pure gift of God's washing us into God's family. Lutheran teaching emphasizes that God turns toward us first, and that the sacraments are purely about what God does for us (not what we do for God). The welcoming of a vulnerable baby into this family of God is a reminder of this truth—that before God we are helpless and totally reliant on righteousness that comes from outside of ourselves. Note that the font is round, meaning all are equal as they stand around it.

The table in the middle of the piece looks a lot like the font on the left side, and that's on purpose—this is the other sacrament, Holy Communion, which is based on the same principle of equality before God. Jesus, who is on the left of the table with Peter's head in his lap, is not in the middle like in the usual picture of the Lord's Supper; instead, he sits at a table among friends without a sense of hierarchy. This reminds us that in our baptism we are made one with Christ, and regarded by God as such. Even in our brokenness, even in our sinfulness, Christ wants us to sit at the table with him, because of God's love and mercy poured out for us. The table of Holy Communion is another place where we receive pure grace from God, and where no person is better than another. This meal is a great equalizer (far different from when priests alone were deemed worthy to receive the elements as the congregation simply watched).

On the right, local pastor Johannes Bugenhagen holds keys in his hand—these are the symbol for forgiveness extended following confession. Luther and the reformers only preached about two sacraments, but said that confession and forgiveness flow out of our baptism—because we have been washed into grace we are set free to repent and confess so that we might fully experience the mercy extended to us in our baptism. Luther said, "You come to confession not to earn or deserve forgiveness but to accept and receive it as a gift, so that you can come away with "a cheerful heart and conscience."

And finally, the bottom panel of this altar piece is perhaps one of the most famous images of the Lutheran Reformation. It is an image of Jesus Christ in the center, displayed prominently in his dying love for us on the cross, with Martin Luther on one side, in the pulpit, pointing toward Christ, and with the congregation on the other side, their gazes following Luther's finger to Christ on the cross. The Lutheran Reformation preached the importance of refocusing all that we do—our life, our worship, our every breath—on the love that is poured out for us by Jesus on the cross. It is this moment in scripture that most clearly shows us God's character. God is willing to go to the ends of the Earth, to the depths of Hell, to death and back, to extend God's heart to us. This should be the center of our teaching—everything else flows from the grace received here.

I encourage you in these upcoming days to remember this image of Christ's love for you, poured out on the throne of the cross. Let this be the most important thing about your life this month.

In Christ, Pastor Marissa

