

Reformation Sunday  
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, October 24, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

Reformation is the day that we as Protestants - Christians in the Lutheran Tradition - celebrate the fact that we have a choice in how we express our faith. At the risk of sounding too much like a history lesson and not enough like a sermon, let me elaborate on that a bit.

We're going to start at the beginning: Jesus dies; he's raised from the dead; and he ascends into heaven. He then sends the Spirit down to us, which we celebrate on Pentecost. We call that day the Church's birthday. Now the disciples (who are renamed the Apostles, or, to translate it literally from the Greek, "Ambassadors") begin to actively spread the word and work of Jesus' message throughout their known world. They're able to accomplish this fairly quickly for a few reasons. First, if for no other reason than that the Roman Empire has made travel around the Mediterranean Sea area relatively safe and easy. There is also the common language of Greek that's used for commerce and communication. But of course, we would have to say that the most important reason is because the Lord God wanted it to succeed.

For the first few hundred years, this Jewish sect, as Christians were seen, was illegal in the Imperial eyes, and therefore, upon occasion they were prosecuted and persecuted. But it really depended upon who was sitting on the throne and what those believers did to tick off that particular Caesar. Now, those initial years were when some basic theology was hammered out. First of all was the divinity and humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. For those of you who don't remember your confirmation days, we say he is 100% both. Yes, I know it's a paradox - that's one of those *faith* things. Also, there began the discussion of how the Spirit fit into things. There are some written records of fist fights breaking out on the streets of Alexandria, Egypt over whether the Spirit is *equal with* or *subordinate to* God as Father. Have you heard any interesting theological discussions as you walk down the streets of Harrisburg, lately? It must have been interesting times.

Around the year 300 AD a Roman general named Constantine came to power. He won a strategic battle because he followed what he was instructed to do in a vision. He had this vision in which he saw a Chi Rho, and a voice told him "with this symbol, you will conquer." Now a Chi Rho, for those of us who might not know what it is, are two Greek letters. A Chi looks kind of like an "X," (which is where "Faith X" gets their name, it's really Faith **Chi**, but they want to say Faith X). So the Chi looks like an "X," and the Rho is the thing that looks like a capital P. We usually see them as an X with the P superimposed upon it. But more importantly the Chi and the Rho are the first two letters in the Greek word "χριστος" (Christos) which is translated as "Christ." So when you see a Chi Rho, just think of it as shorthand for "Christ." (And as an aside, we also have to remember that "Christ" is NOT Jesus' last name. Christ is what he is: Savior, Messiah, Christ.)

So Constantine wins his battle, he ascends to the throne, and upon doing so he legalizes Christianity. That's when things for the church start to get a little wonky. Because, once it becomes legal, the church uses the template of the Roman government in order to begin to build on. So all of those local congregations and all of the ministry that had been handled by lay people, mainly because there just weren't enough folks whom we would call "clergy" to go around, all those lay people got pushed back. What I would describe as, for lack of a better word, the "bureaucracy" began to gain strength and power. That wasn't necessarily a BAD thing. The Church was able to begin to produce more folk that we would call as "Clergy." The Church was able to respond to needs of congregations quickly; worship became coordinated; scripture was compiled; it wasn't until after Christianity became legal that we get our first form of our Bible. (The Bible did not spring into being upon Jesus' ascension into heaven.) Scripture was compiled; it was translated into a common language. The language of the day, which as I said a little bit ago, it had been Greek, but by the time the Bible was put together in that form, it had switched from Greek to Latin.

As time passed, and the bureaucracy became more and more fixed, and less flexible, so much so, that around the year 1000 AD, the church split. The eastern part of the church based themselves out of Constantinople, in modern day Turkey (today known as Istanbul). That's known as the Orthodox Church. The other branch solidified their hold in Rome, becoming known at that time as the Western Church (today we know its descendant as the Roman Catholic Church). Although at one time the church had gone out of its way to bring scripture to people by translating it into the common, or the Latin word is, into the "vulgar" language, the Western Church kept the language of Latin for worship, for scripture, for business, long after Latin was supplanted by other local languages.

As the church increased in numbers, their holdings increased as well. The church needed more and greater resources to help take care of all of those holdings and resources. So, even though the Church couldn't raise taxes in and of itself, but because the Church controlled the government at that point, there were able to get some tax funds. Another way that they could get some money to help take care of all of their holdings, was that if you wanted to see a saint – a saint is someone who is purported to be holy, or special, or sacred - if you wanted to see the remains of a saint, you could do that especially if you were willing to pay for that privilege. If you wanted some special token from one of those saints, you could have it - again, if you were willing to pay for it. You could purchase a bone or a fragment of a bone supposedly from a saint. You could purchase clothing, or a piece of cloth supposedly worn by one of these people. You could even purchase a piece of wood that was supposedly taken from the cross that Jesus himself was crucified on.

Another thing was that scripture was not allowed to be studied in private. Very few individuals were allowed to own a Bible. Bibles were literally chained to the lecterns in the church. It was illegal to take them out of the building.

By the late 1400's, because of budget constraints and overwhelming costs, measures were put in place to raise even more funds for the Church, specifically through the sale of these things called **indulgences**. We know what it is to indulge ourselves, right? Say you've had a long day at work, things were so piled up that needed to get done yesterday and you barely had time to touch

them let alone get done all of the things that you needed to get done today. By the time you get home all you want to do is sit down and crack open an ice cold Mountain Dew and get yourself a good chunk of chocolate. Oh, no, wait – that’s me. Well, I’m sure you have something that you like to do, the way that you like to *indulge* yourself. To by an indulgence in the 1400's went something like this: Say you wanted to do something that you knew was wrong (we call that Sin). You knew what you wanted to do was sinful, you wanted to do it anyway, BUT you didn’t want to spend all those extra centuries in purgatory (which by the way is NOT a scriptural concept, that’s something else the bureaucracy helped to create) so, You Would Pay Someone Money for a piece of paper that said more or less along these lines: “The Bearer of this paper has made compensation for the sin that has been committed.” In other words, you could buy yourself a “Get Out of Purgatory” card. Not a bad deal, really (although I really don’t think that the Lord God Almighty recognizes the validity of those pieces of paper).

There were folk who thought a lot of these things were wrong. More than just one particular German monk who taught the Old Testament. There were other folk before Martin Luther. There were people like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, a couple of centuries before Martin Luther. There were contemporaries of Martin Luther in the 1400 and 1500's, folks like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox.

Martin Luther was not looking to break the Church apart. He wanted to fix the things that he saw that were broken. He wanted to *reform* it. That’s what the whole ninety-five Theses were in a nutshell – it’s Martin Luther saying ‘we need to sit down and talk about this stuff.’ Unfortunately for Luther, those in power saw this not as a call to improve, but took it as an assault on them personally.

Which brings us to today, because one of the outcomes of the Reformation movement is that we can worship in the style that we want to, in a language that we comprehend, in a place where we’re free to gather, and those are, I believe, good things. I also believe that we, as a Church, need to be careful that we do not become like the church of Luther’s day. We shouldn’t be forcing people to believe or worship. The more that I study scripture, and the more that I talk with those who are far more versed in understanding of theology, the more that I am convinced is that the only things that honestly, truly, and really matter, are the understanding that we, as human beings, can in no manner, EVER make ourselves worthy of God’s love. No matter how much we want to, no matter how much we may try, no matter what we try to do, I can NEVER make myself good enough to earn God’s love. But the Best and Greatest and ONLY news that we need to hear; the only news that matters is that We Don’t Have to Do That. God has already made us worthy of that love. God has made me worthy, God has made you worthy, God has made each and every one of you here tonight worthy, and God has done so through the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

Everything else: how we worship, what language we worship with, what translation of the Bible we read, whether we use wafers or flat bread, whether we use wine or grape juice, who we say is okay to lead us in worship, whether or not we wear robes or suits and ties or shorts when we lead worship, if we use organs and choirs, or electronic instruments or piano and guitar, or whatever other matter might come up that seeks to divide us one from another - NONE of that is MORE

important than the fact that God so loved the world, God sent the Son, Jesus the Christ to reform each and every one of our hearts so that we might be a child of God.

Amen.