

## “The Church is Always in Need of Reform”

Romans 3:19-28

Each year, at this time, we are reminded of the old saying that the church is always in need of reform. This is not because the Body of Christ called His Church is bad, but rather the members of His Body are sinners who are continually wandering away from the truth. As we heard read in last week’s Epistle reading from 2 Timothy 4, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth.”

That time is now. Starting in the so-called “Age of Enlightenment,” accelerating in the 1800’s, really becoming mainstream in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and now generations of people, children in particular, have been told that God is not important. And I am not just speaking about the stereotypical atheist professor or teacher saying this. (I am so thankful that neither of my two daughters will be subject to the indoctrination of the university system).

But it’s not the overt attacks on our young people that I am most concerned with. I’m most concerned with parents who did not intend to tell their children that God is not important, but that is the message that was received. We are in need of a Reformation. I am not talking about a bold change in church politics or an Internet campaign to change our educational system. Reformation starts in your home.

Once the Word of God is clear and present there, then we can start moving out in our sphere of influence, as God allows. The Holy Spirit does His work when and where He wills. We cannot force the next generation to believe. Our task is to be faithful, living witnesses that there is nothing more important than the saving mercy and grace of God found in His Word of promise.

Luther sought to reform the church from within because the church was not presenting God, Jesus Christ in particular, as being the source of the saving mercy and grace of God found in His Word of promise. In the Medieval Church, Christ was portrayed as a vindictive Judge, the new and greatest law giver, who would hold all the world accountable, and if you didn't do enough good works or purchase enough of His merit and grace with the indulgences, then you would spend a lengthy time in Purgatory. Satan was happy that the people feared this God, because the Gospel was hidden. This is not how God presented Himself to His people in the Old or New Testament.

We celebrate the beginning of the Reformation of the church on this day because of Luther nailing the 95 Theses. He wrote them in Latin and wanted to have a debate among the scholars on the use of indulgences. He wanted to "get his house in order". Thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit allowed the Gospel to be spread far outside the walls of the University at Wittenberg.

The church is always in need of reform. Salvation by works and a misrepresentation of Jesus is still the problem today. The Americanized vision of Christ is the painting of the smiling Jesus. We love the happy Jesus in His flowing robes and sandals. And there is a certainly a place for

the image of Jesus with a friendly, smiling face – embracing and blessing the children.

The problem comes when that is all He is viewed as being. Or worse, God is simply referred to as “The Big Guy in the Sky” or “The Man Upstairs.” There is an old saying that “familiarity breeds contempt.” This is why, in a court of law, when the judge enters, the people stand. And they refer to him as “your honor” throughout the entire proceeding – even if they have a personal relationship with him. When Judge Vahle was seated at his bench, even lifelong friends from Our Redeemer would not dare approach him and say, “Hi Chet.” You could be cited for “contempt of court.”

Our Divine, Righteous Judge is not afforded this honor in the world today. Be very cautious in how you use God’s name. There is a commandment and a petition of the Lord’s Prayer dedicated to preserving its holiness. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”

Be thankful that Paul continues with the Good News that the righteousness of God and our justification by His grace are bestowed on us as a gift, because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This being true, how can we allow our children to be taught that He is unimportant – that He is not worthy of the reverence, honor, and attention He and His Name deserves.

As C.S. Lewis famously wrote, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

By definition, anything that has eternal consequences must be worth seriously investigating. But Satan is happy that our unserious world thinks of God as “The Big Guy in the Sky” and Jesus is the guy in flowing robes and sandals who teaches you to be the best you that you can be. Satan is happy when people do not “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Satan is happy when God’s Law is said to be a bunch a rules that you must obey in order to be saved or to be a “good Christian.” Satan is happy when the real Gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ suffered and died so that sinners like you and me can live, apart from any works that we do (good or bad); Satan is happy when the real Gospel remains hidden.

The Reformation starts in your home. Be serious about who God is. Make sure that everyone else in your household knows that God is important to you, that He is worthy of attention, and He deserves fear, honor, love, and trust. You cannot force anyone to believe, and the Holy Spirit is the only One who can create faith. But faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Be a faithful witness that the Word of God is important.

And study your Small Catechism. When you have exhausted that, come and ask me for a copy of the Large Catechism. I will gladly give you one. Take God seriously. He has been serious in His work to save you. Rejoice that you are a part of the church of the Reformation. The church is always in need of reform, just like the sinners in the church are always in need of hearing the good news and receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation in His Word and Sacraments.

Reformation starts in the home. Reformation will never happen without the gifts we receive in God’s House. Amen.