

“The Church is Always in Need of Reform”

Rom. 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 lesson 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 middle of the 20th Century, the past few generations of children have been told that God is not important. I know that the adults did not intend to tell this to the children, 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. 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 Wittenburg.

The church is always in need of reform. Salvation by works and a misrepresentation of Jesus is still the problem. The Americanized vision of Christ is the painting of the smiling Jesus. We love the happy Jesus in His flowing robes and sandals. God is 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 time – even if they have a personal relationship with him.

Our Divine, Righteous Judge is not afforded this honor in the world today. Our children have been taught that He is unimportant – that He is not worthy of the reverence, honor and attention He deserves. He deserves constant attention.

The early Christians gathered around God's Word and Sacrament every day. In our culture, even among Christians, it is widely taught that God's thoughts and His will are unimportant – that they are not worth seriously investigating. How many times have you heard people say, "All you need is Jesus"? The church of the Reformation is told: "Debating these points of doctrine divides the church. All you need is Jesus." The church of the Reformation asks, "What 'Jesus' are you talking about?" Jesus, as we hear of Him in God's Word, is the Son of God begotten from eternity through whom all things were made. And because Adam and all of his children have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Jesus was born of Mary, carried the burden of the sin of the world to His cross, suffered and died and was buried with that sin. He rose again and has promised that all who have faith in Him are justified by faith apart from any works. And most people who have heard this message have treated God as if He were unimportant.

Now we can talk about all the different opinions about God and the myriad of church groups and cults and how modern and postmodern philosophy has infiltrated the conversation about God, but none of that really matters to you. When confronted with Jesus, the question you must answer is the question Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

If you truly believe that He is the Son of God who gave you life; and even more, gave you your new life through the waters of Baptism. If you believe that He took on flesh, was born as a human; that He took on your sin, and was crucified, died, rose again – taking away the guilt of your sin, opening the gates of the kingdom of heaven for you.

If you believe that because of what He has done, and not anything you have done, on the Last Day you will be spared from the fires of hell for all eternity, and you will be raised in new resurrected bodies to live in utter and complete joy forever. If you believe this, how can there be anything more important to you and your children than hearing this Good News, partaking of the broken body and shed blood of Christ, and learning everything you can about what God has done?

Satan is happy that God is thought of 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 of salvation in Jesus Christ apart from works, 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 God’s Word and receiving His sacraments. Amen.