

Faith Lutheran Church

Sunday, October 25, 2020
Reformation Sunday



Welcome

Call to Worship

We gather together in the name of the Father, and of the Son+, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Call to Confession

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. May we take a moment to go before God in open and honest confession.

Prayer of Confession (please join in confessing our sins)

Most merciful God,

we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your holy name. Amen

Declaration of Forgiveness

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for His sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by His authority alone, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Opening Prayer

Please join me in prayer:

Almighty God, gracious Lord, we thank You that Your Holy Spirit renews the church in every age. Pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in Your word, protect and comfort them in times of trial, defend them against all enemies of the gospel, and bestow on the church Your saving peace, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Readings and Psalm

- **Jeremiah 31:31-34**
- **Psalm 46**
- **Romans 3:19-28**

I will write My law in their hearts, says the Lord

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Justified by God's grace as a gift

The Holy Gospel according to John 8:31-36

Jesus speaks of truth and freedom as spiritual realities known through His word. He reveals the truth that sets people free from sin.

³¹Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him, “If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered Him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’”

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the Son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to You, O Christ.

Sermon

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christians gather around the world today to celebrate Reformation Sunday. It was on October 31, 1517, when the monk, Martin Luther, nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Electorate of Saxony in the Holy Roman Empire (later called Germany). More properly known as the “*Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*”, these 95 theses outlined grievances Luther had with the Roman Catholic Church. The 95 Theses would later become the foundation of the Protestant Reformation.

Throughout the past five-hundred-and-three-years, Christian churches have experienced other types of “reformations”.

In early 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States, is comprised of 10,396 congregations. From 2009 to 2013, 675 of these congregations left the ELCA, most of them due to decisions that were made at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Among many other decisions at that Assembly was one to adopt the Human Sexuality Statement. By a vote of 559 to 451, delegates approved a resolution declaring that the church would find a way for people in “publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships” to serve as official ministers. This document further highlighted equality for *all* people. As of December 31, 2018, there were 9,091 congregations in the ELCA. (*for the complete Statement, please see <http://download.elca.org/elca%20resource%20repository/sexualityss.pdf>*)

In May of 2017, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church USA, J. Herbert Nelson, II, declared in a statement: “We are not dying. We are Reforming. We are moving towards a new future as a denomination.”

This statement was in response to statistics that had recently been made available by the PCUSA’s Office of the General Assembly which showed the denomination “continuing a steep, uninterrupted decline in 2016. The U.S.-based denomination shed 89,893 members in 2016, a decline of 5.7% percent, dropping below 1.5 million members for the first time. A net 191 congregations closed or were dismissed to other denominations, bringing the denominational total to 9,451 congregations.”

“Despite cries proclaiming the death of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we remain a viable interfaith and ecumenical partner in many local communities while proclaiming a prophetic witness throughout the world, Nelson stated.”

Most mainline Christian churches have faced the same dilemma within the past decade or two (or more) – declining membership. Church statisticians, research and evaluation commissions, and theologians have tracked data and produced an abundance of trend reports showing numerous reasons why this is happening. Members used to sit in fellowship halls drinking a cup of coffee and discussing why the church’s membership has declined for the past three-, five-, ten-, twenty-years. Why John Doe or Jane Smith doesn’t attend anymore.

And now, in the middle of a pandemic, I believe we are facing another reformation. It may not be *nearly* as dramatic as the Reformation Martin Luther sparked five- hundred-and-three-years ago. It may not be as *drastic* as the Christian churches have experienced due to declining membership over the years.

But who knows?

The church of today is *still* trying to function and adjust while the world is *still* in a pandemic. Pastors can preach all they want about how important church attendance is to one’s spiritual life. Members can question time and time again why other members feel safe enough to go to the big box store but not to church. There are very few of us – if any among us - who have lived through a pandemic. We must acknowledge that this pandemic affects *each* of us differently. And show grace to one another.

I recall an article from several years ago, 2017, that was published in the *HuffPost*, formerly called the *Huffington Post*. It stated several reasons why church attendance is down.

To summarize, the church used to be the social gathering place for individuals and families. Everybody went every week. And if you didn’t go, the pastor or council member or session member was calling you to see why you were absent. The church was not only a place to worship God but to visit with your friends as well.

Do you remember *way back* when stores used to be closed on Sundays? You made sure you did your shopping on Saturday or you had to wait until Monday. And any sports that were played on Sundays didn’t happen until the afternoon. Times sure have changed. Sunday mornings aren’t reserved for worship services anymore.

Another reason for declining membership, according to the *HuffPost*, is that people are traveling much more than they ever traveled in the past. And seldom is the time that even regular churchgoers seek out that unfamiliar church when they are on vacation.

Work. How many of you have had to work on weekends? Of course, the *essential workers* are necessary to protect us and keep us healthy; law enforcement officers, emergency personnel, and health care workers. I think one thing most people have realized during this pandemic is that our essential workers go over and above their called-duties.

And then there’s the ole’ “Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy” commandment. I’m pretty sure God didn’t intend this commandment to mean that we should skip church! For some, Sunday is the only day of rest and this day represents the time they can relax, enjoy some downtime, and be with their families. Martin Luther’s explanation to the Third Commandment says, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.” (Luther’s Small Catechism) God invites us to rest and to be refreshed. Our time

together sharing God's word, water, bread, and prayer strengthens our faith as we are sent out into the world to proclaim Christ crucified. If this isn't able to happen on Sunday, find another day.

The *HuffPost* article also states, "One more reason is *technology* has not only changed our everyday lives but has major influence on our spiritual lives. The Internet and other media offerings allow you to tailor a religious life to your own timing and liking. With so many congregations streaming services online, you can actually go to services in your pajamas now."

I'm sure the writer of that article three years ago had no idea how popular this would be today! And I will not confirm nor deny if I ever sat home on a Sunday morning in the past seven months and listened to church services online or on the radio in my pajamas!

We don't know what the church *after the pandemic* will look like much less know how many members will attend on any given Sunday. We don't know if members feel the church has abandoned them because they weren't able to hold a baptism or a wedding or a funeral in the building during the pandemic. We don't know if members will prefer the online option to attend services shared by thousands of pastors and leaders around the world. We just don't know.

But what we do know is this: Five-hundred-and-three-years ago, Martin Luther sparked a change in the way things had always been done. His discernment of scripture led the way to the Reformation that brought change to the church that no one could have imagined.

It *is* too early to tell what this reforming time will do to the church. We don't know how long the pandemic will last. We have weathered seven months so far and, some days, it is difficult to believe there is a light at the end of the tunnel. But one thing is for sure. With God's help and strength, and with Luther's strong conviction that is engrained in us, we *must* and we *will* embrace the change that is to come. This is most certainly true. **Amen.**

Blessing

And now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (*Philippians 4:7*)

Prayers of Intercession

With confidence in God's grace and mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. *A brief silence.*

Renew and inspire the church in the freedom of the gospel, O God. Where the church is in error, reform it. Where the church speaks Your truth, strengthen it. Where the church is divided, unify it. Ignite in us the working of the Holy Spirit.

As the earth changes, as mountains shake and the waters roar, may we care for this planet as a holy habitation for all living things. Sustain all peoples and lands recovering from natural disasters of any kind.

Guide areas of the world divided or traumatized by conflict, especially in our own land. Free all from slavery and human trafficking, and protect all in harm's way.

Release those living in bondage to debts, chronic pain, or addiction. Grant healing touch to those who are ill. We continue to pray for all those who are affected by the coronavirus. We pray for those suffering in any way this day, especially those we name in our hearts, our minds, and with our voices at this time.....(please name your prayer concerns).

In this family of faith, we give thanks for courageous voices that have remained firm in their commitment to the one who frees us from sin and death. Centered in Your grace, unify us in the hope of the gospel.

Even in death, You free us and give us a place in Your house. We give thanks for our ancestors who have shown us truth and freedom, especially Martin Luther and all those who work for the renewal of the church.

Listen as we call on You, O God, and enfold in Your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Our Lord's Prayer

I invite you to join in praying the prayer our Lord Jesus taught us...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name,

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen

Offering

It is generally at this time during the service that worshipers are invited to share their gifts for the Mission and Ministry of the church. Whether you choose to pause at this time or make your contribution following this service, we encourage you to continue your support of the ministry.

Offertory Prayer *(please join in prayer)*

Blessed are You,

O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through Your goodness You have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to Your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that You have made, for the sake of Him who gave Himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Benediction

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look upon you with favor and grant you peace; in the name of God the Father, God the Son+, and God the Spirit that makes us one. **Amen.**

Dismissal

Go in peace. Remember the poor.

Thanks be to God.

Sources:

www.presbyterianmission.org

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