

Reformation 2020  
Synodwide Online Worship  
Bishop Katherine Finegan

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Prior to this pandemic, the conversations around church leadership were about trying to nudge congregations to consider their mission, their purpose, and all that God was calling them to do and be. For the last 30 years at least, Transformational ministry efforts and building congregational vitality has centered on Mission Statements, guiding principles, and focusing in with a laser on why God created the church and your church, in the first place. As congregational leadership gathered for retreats and workshops meant to energize ministry efforts that would engage people in authentic mission, discussion began with the question, “What do you love about your church?” People answered with enthusiasm... “We love the people, we’re like a family, we love the singing, the fellowship, the food, we have a deep sense of community here.”

In the past 6 months, much of what people have said they love about their church has been stripped away. The food, the activities, the singing, everyone being together, we just can’t do things the way we used to. Many people who had been concerned about declining attendance and anxious about losing their church buildings, now may well be among those who cannot gather in their beloved sanctuary space that holds memories and the lingering presence of past generations. Pre-pandemic conversations about mission and purpose, at the most one could hope for is one small step towards a shift in culture, one more gentle nudge towards a clearer understanding that the way we’ve been doing church for the last 100 years is changing, and more than that, needs to change. And now, here we are.

It’s as if the fast forward button has been pushed. What had been small steps and progressive conversations is now an all out full on sprint. The pace is dizzying. We can hardly keep up with the changes much less anticipate what is coming. Every day brings new challenges. There are no

objections to trying something different with “but that’s not the way we’ve always done it” because so much of what we do is the first time. Talk about Reformation. To be re-formed. To take what was, and form it or watch it be formed, into something different. It’s curious to me that what the church has been saying is necessary for the last thirty years or so is finally here, whether we are ready for it or not. The changes feel imposed upon us. They grieve us. We are suffering these changes. But put another way, if we had waited until we were ready for change, I’m not sure any significant changes would have happened, not in our lifetimes anyway.

So what is God up to? How is the Holy Spirit of Christ active in the midst of everything? What changes do you see? When this is all over, and we look back with the benefit, the 2020 vision of hindsight, what will we see? Will we wonder why we ever did things the way we did them? Will we miss some things, and yearn for what was? Will we try and put things back just the way they were? Is that what we’ve been doing for the last 30 years or so? Trying to get back to what was?

I do remember how it used to be. When I was a kid. I went to church because that’s what my family did. That’s what everyone I knew did. There was no question what we would be doing on a Sunday morning. My father would play loud music in the hallway and tear the covers off of warm bodies to rouse us from sleep and get us out of bed. As a youth, I didn’t need that kind of motivation as I went to church happily to see my friends. It was fun. Believe it or not I found confirmation class interesting. I remember standing with other teenagers, eating something someone had baked, standing in a circle and laughing as the show Saturday Night Live from the night before was relived and dissected. And I would volunteer for nursery duty, because that meant I could play with the little kids during church. I did get into trouble though when I stayed there with some friends even though there weren’t any little kids to watch.

Church was about Jesus, yes, but if I'm honest, church for me was as much about friends and traditions, part of the built-in rhythm of my life. And since I went to a Lutheran school, I didn't know anyone that was outside my own Christian tradition. Mission fields were across the ocean. The people I knew *already* knew Jesus and I remember only one lesson on the skill of sharing my faith. How to share our faith, how to even describe our faith, was not something I remember dwelling on.

And then in a few short decades, the world shifted. And suddenly people who had never been taught how to articulate who Jesus was and is to them are being asked to share with others. And when faith and religious practice is all mixed up with fellowship and favorite recipes and social circles and a sense of belonging and cherished gathering space, it gets even more difficult to focus in on defining who Jesus is to you, what that relationship means to you, and what you need in order to feel equipped to invite others into a relationship with God in Christ Jesus as you experience it.

So what if one of the blessings of this pandemic is that God has removed the distractions? What if many of the blessings of the community of faith have been removed so that all we are left with...is the word that is Jesus. We are no longer distracted by traditions and memories, by familiar patterns and practices. Now we have to remember again what is important, what is essential, what is necessary, and why it is so. It's not a bad place to be, even if it is uncomfortable and we feel sad and we still want things to be the way they were. For something that is so very important, it is good to reclaim our faith, to identify our why, and be reformed into a shape and a voice and a witness that finds new ways to proclaim to the people of this time in this world that Jesus matters, and Jesus matters to you.

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." So what is that truth that will make us free? For the gospel writer John, the truth was the recognition of Jesus as the presence of God

with us, the living Word who is the embodied voice of God spoken and speaking into our world. How then do we look at our world and the issues that plague it, through the lens of the witness of Jesus for us as believers to embody that truth today? *If we can agree* that the witness of Jesus in scripture teaches us that we are to welcome the outcast and the stranger, then what does that mean as we consider the complexities of immigration policy? *If we can agree* that scripture teaches us to treat each and every person for whom Jesus died as precious and worthy, since there is no longer slave or Greek, male or female, what does that mean for racial justice? For our LGBTQ siblings? For our indigenous neighbors? *If we can agree* the example of Jesus shows us that we are to be the voice of the those who are unheard, and Jesus shows us that to be great, we are to be a servant, what then does that mean when it comes to advocacy, and putting the needs of the neighbor first? Together we recognize and confess that Jesus is the embodied voice of God spoken into the world. However, how to live into this truth, how we apply this truth as the church, begins with your relationship with Jesus as the truth, and from there, by the grace of God, we as disciples of Jesus strive to make a positive difference in the world for the sake of Christ and in the name of Jesus to free others to be all that God would have them become.

There is much in our world that wasn't on the radar during the Reformation of the church and society 500 years ago. But in these pandemic days, as we are being re-formed, the need for our efforts in ministry remain. Despite being apart, we are still bound together, as the Body of Christ, through the Word that is Jesus, that claims us as his own. The promises of God in Christ Jesus are as true today as ever. The steady and unflinching presence of the risen Christ is with you, calling you to faith, and inviting you to dwell, in him as the word yes, but even more, to receive a place of rest, comfort, and peace, not in our buildings, but in a relationship. You are the dwelling place of the Spirit of Christ. You, me, and all of us together, even apart. We are the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.