

## Those Were The Days

Today is a profound, once-in-a-lifetime day for Protestant Christians. This year we celebrate not just Reformation Day, but the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the earth-shaking renewal of the faith that has shaped Christianity and all of Western Civilization ever since.

We begin the festivities here at this service as we sing that traditional hymn written by Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” We then cross the street to Immaculate Conception this afternoon for an historic joint prayer service with the Roman Catholic community.

There is no denying that our relationship with the Catholics has been a difficult and often tragic journey over the centuries. But today, formerly bitter religious foes will come together as brothers and sisters in Christ in a way we have never done before.

If that isn’t worth celebrating, I don’t know what is. The party will continue here at St. John’s following the service as we host a meal for everyone.

You might ask, as some people have, how can Lutherans and Catholics celebrate such a divisive event in their history as the Reformation? Isn’t that the event that tore us apart to begin with? Aren’t there still important issues on which disagree?

Yes, there are. But it is important that we come together today to reflect on our history because of what lies in our Gospel reading for today.

A long time ago, a pastor recounted to me his experience at one of his early congregations. It was a place where the people were very set in their ways, if you can imagine such a church. During the course of a council meeting, as they were discussing a situation, the pastor suggested that they might want to consider making a change.

“Change?” said the council president. “We tried that once. It didn’t work.”

That council could have used a refresher course on Reformation history. The Reformation was all about change. And it worked. Perhaps not perfectly, but it worked. Today’s Gospel tells us why change is not only a good thing in the church, it is absolutely essential.

Jesus was talking to a group of Jews who believed in him. “If you continue in my word,” he says, “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

“No need for that,” say the listeners, proudly. “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What could possibly make you think we need to be made free?”

Well, let me think. What is the defining event of the Hebrew Scriptures? The Exodus. The release from (what was that?) yes, slavery.

Deuteronomy 5:15 says, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” That phrase, *Remember that you were slaves* is repeated over and over throughout the Old Testament.

What is the second most defining event in the Old Testament? Probably the exile, when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were destroyed, and their inhabitants hauled off as *slaves* to Babylon.

This was the event that the prophets warned would happen and expounded upon for many chapters. Then in Ezra and Nehemiah, we have the story of the joyful deliverance of these former slaves back to Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Temple.

For the people to whom Jesus is speaking, every page of their history is steeped in the reality that they were slaves, whom God set free. That fact is crucial to knowing who they are. That’s why Scriptures drill into them again and again, “Remember that you were slaves.”

So how can these people say to Jesus? “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.” Have they been paying attention to *anything* in their religious tradition?

They take pride in believing they are the ones who know the truth, have always known the truth. But they have slid so far from the truth that they hardly know which way is up, much less which way the path is leading them.

*Never been slaves, never will be. No need to change.* They’ve slid so far that they don’t know who they are anymore. They don’t have a clue how badly they are in need of a change.

Change in the church is too often misunderstood as getting rid of the tried and true, and replacing it with some new-fangled popular fad. We justifiably rebel against that.

But change is not radical rejection of tradition, of everything in the past, change is a way to get back on the path from which we’ve slid.

Notice the goal is to get back to the path, not get back to the starting point. The reign of God does not point toward 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany or 19<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia or how it was back when I was a child; it points forward.

We are doing some things differently in our service today. We're messing a little bit with Reformation Sunday traditions. But the changes do not reject the past; they embrace it. We celebrate the shared memory of traditional Lutheran hymns that remind us of the path we have followed. Right alongside that, we worship in new ways to help us relocate the path we have lost, and to point the way toward the future.

We need continual change because the default course for humans in a sinful world, in which all constantly fall short of the glory of God, is to backslide. To forget who we are, like Jesus' audience did. To hide behind the comfort and safety of tradition without remembering what the tradition was for.

When that happens, change is needed to jar us back to reality. To pull ourselves out of the ditch into which we've slid. Change is not only a good thing in the church, it is essential, not to get rid of the past, but to wake us up and remind us of things that should never be forgotten.

We should be careful about looking down our noses at Jesus' audience in this story. We should be careful about pointing fingers at on the church hierarchy in at the time of the Reformation. Jesus could just as well be talking to us. Luther could just as well be talking to us.

Is it unreasonable to ask whether Lutherans suffer the same delusions of grandeur as Jesus' audience or Luther's? As David Lose has asked, "Is it hard to picture Lutherans saying with pride on Reformation Day, "we are followers of Martin Luther and have never been slaves?"

Reformation is about remembering who we are. If we cannot remember who we are, and whose we are, then we don't know why we exist. And if we don't know why we exist, we are not going to have a clue as to where we are going, much less how to get there.

This might be something to contemplate as we sing "A Mighty Fortress" today. Is Reformation Day a day on which we celebrate an unchanging 500-year-old tradition, or a day on which celebrate the sweeping change that defined the Reformation?

Do we celebrate change by vowing not to change, by entrenching ourselves in a fortress of nostalgia. Do we sing "A Mighty Fortress" like Archie Bunker crooning a chorus of "Those Were the Days?"

I have heard it said that the Lutheran church has carefully positioned itself so that if our culture ever returns to the 1950s, boy will we be ready for it! That attitude contradicts everything the Reformation stands for.

The reign of God brings new life, not old, and brings it in ways we can scarcely imagine. Reformation is about being set free from sin, death, selfishness, the power of evil, anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God.

Pride, comfort, and nostalgia can get in the way of that relationship. When that happens, we need to do something to get back to a true relationship. As the church needed that housecleaning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we need that today, and will need it in the future. As we all know to our frustration, clean houses never stay clean for long.

What does it mean to sing the grand traditional hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God” on Reformation Day, on a day when we celebrate breaking with a grand tradition?

In 1863, the Confederate States of America could well have sung, “A Mighty Fortress is our Vicksburg, MS.” Protected by rivers, impassable terrain, thick walls, and a commanding position looking down on all approaches, it was widely considered one of the most impenetrable fortresses in existence.

When Union forces tried to attack it, they suffered horrendous losses while Confederate defenders took casualties in the single digits. Safe behind the walls of their fortress, Gen. John Pemberton’s army felt completely safe.

Realizing they could not capture Vicksburg in battle, the Union army set about blocking all approaches to this fortress. No reinforcements could enter. No supplies, no food, no ammunition. The army and the citizenry were gradually being strangled and starved.

General Joseph Johnston made repeated efforts to relieve Vicksburg. But when those efforts failed, he grew alarmed. He urged Pemberton to fight his way out and save his army while he still had the chance. Pemberton, though, chose to stay within the protective walls of his mighty fortress.

It proved a fatal mistake. By July 4, 1863, the force at Vicksburg was too weak to put up any defense. Trapped in his fortress, Pemberton had to surrender his entire army.

A couple of Reformation lessons may be learned from this page in history. Just like last week, we have a Law lesson and a Gospel lesson.

The law lesson is that even the mightiest human-made fortress needs constant replenishment in order to survive. Those who think they can sit forever behind those walls without constant renewal are doomed to fail.

We as a church would do well to remember that. The modern church is seldom troubled by a head-on assault. When it runs into trouble it is because it starves.

Any time we get complacent, and think we have it all figured out, we forget who we are. Any time we take the church for granted, it becomes starved of the resources that keep it strong. And that's when we need a Reformation.

That is why we at St. John's have chosen to celebrate this moment in history by looking to the future with our Next 500 Fund. This is not a time to coast on what the church has accomplished in the last 500 years. It is a time to start thinking about if we still are on the path to which God has called us, and if not, to figure out how to get there.

The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation is a time to think about the future, to bring in fresh resources, reinforcements, and supplies that will make us a fountain of life for all who gather, overflowing into a river of compassion for the world for the next 500 years.

I urge us to keep that in mind as we make our pledges before God this year, and as we consider the opportunity provided by the Next 500 Fund.

Once again, that is law proclamation. Law proclamations serve a necessary purpose. This is a call to action, and what better day to make that call than on this celebration?

But again, as our reading from Romans reminds us, we are above all, a church that preaches the Gospel. While the law tells us what we should do, the Gospel tells us what God does for us. That is the key to our relationship with God.

That's something Jesus' listeners forgot. They were so focused on what they had done as a people that they forgot it was all made possible because of what God did for them. Yes, they were free. But not because they were these amazing people who had never been slaves, rather because God had redeemed them from the slaves they were.

When you forget who you are, you have no way of knowing where you are going.

When we sing, "No strength of our can match evil's might. We would be lost, rejected," I am reminded of Vicksburg. Singing *A Mighty Fortress* helps us to remember what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do.

It reminds us that the reign of God brings new life, not old life, and brings it in ways we can scarcely imagine. It reminds us that we are not left alone in this flawed world to fend for ourselves.

When it seems we are under such a relentless attack from forces beyond our control,

when we are driven to our knees by pain or misfortune,  
when we are discouraged by our failures

when death and disease haunt us,  
when society seems to have gone crazy,  
when we are so sick of living in the pressure cooker of modern life, we can hardly  
stand it,

there is a refuge, a pillar of strength we can lean on. A very present, living,  
moving fortress of love that will never fail us.

On Reformation Day, we gather to take stock of ourselves.  
To remember where we have come from  
To relocate the path we have been called to take.  
To remember who we are and where we are going.

On Reformation Day, we do not sing: “A Mighty Fortress is our Church”  
We do not sing, “A Mighty Fortress is our tradition.”  
We do not sing, “A Mighty Fortress is our doctrine.”  
We sing, “A Mighty Fortress is our GOD.”

That is what will propel and sustain us as we embark on the next 500 years.  
Please stand and sing that song with me now.