

the Reformation Challenge: love one another
Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2008 / Matthew 22: 34-40
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

Today we celebrate the Reformation, a critical event almost five hundred years ago that changed forever the religious outlook of the Western world. During the past two years I did not have an opportunity to celebrate Reformation Sunday, because I served as the Interim Rector of an Episcopal Church. Anglicans tend to ignore Martin Luther. Presbyterians, Methodists, and the United Church of Christ, for the most part, overlook this observance. Only the Lutherans take a Sunday to honor the Reformation tradition.

When I was a teenager, Reformation Sunday was a really big deal. I can remember joining with other Lutheran congregations for a special Reformation Festival in the afternoon or evening, complete with a joint choir and a keynote speaker. *A Mighty Fortress* would be bellowed as if it were a football fight song. We would all, more or less, rejoice in the fact that we were not Roman Catholics, in bondage to the Pope!

I think it is a good thing that we do not have Reformation Festivals anymore. I don't think we should forget the significant aspects of our Reformation tradition, but the excesses in those past celebrations of Martin Luther and the Reformation should warn us of the danger of religious chauvinism in our day.

Now most Christian congregations are observing today as the *Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*. If we were following that pattern, the Gospel lesson assigned for this morning would be Matthew's version of The Great Commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. [Matthew 22: 37a-40]

I wonder if those words might not be a proper theme for us on Reformation Sunday? Today we are challenged to remember not only the good parts of our Lutheran tradition, but also the danger that comes when self-confident assurance of truth is intermingled with a sense of denominational superiority.

There is a very thin line that separates legitimate pride in our tradition from bigoted discrimination against others. With the skill of a football receiver, we must avoid crossing that critical line. No one has the market cornered on truth. In the 21st Century we must seek the things that unite us, rather than celebrating what divides us.

I love Martin Luther and the incredible accomplishments he made in a short amount of time. In honoring Luther we recall his courageous stand for truth, when his life was at risk, his sublime and earthy use of language to communicate faith, and his strong, almost Pentecostal, witness to God's transforming Word. We should celebrate Luther's literary accomplishments, unequaled by any other historic figure. He produced a major written work about every two to three weeks during his professional life. There is no other person who has more significant publications available in printed form.

And yet those of us who bear Luther's name and continue his heritage must acknowledge that in the final years of his life Martin Luther wrote some horrible things about the Jews, whom he arrogantly assumed would convert to Christianity once he had provided an alternative to the medieval Catholic Church. These terrible rants from an old man cannot be rationalized or justified. They remain a singular offense and embarrassment. The last thing a visitor sees when leaving the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, is a grotesque quotation from Martin Luther concerning the Jews, words that inspired Adolph Hitler and other proponents of anti-Semitism.

Why am I saying all of this on Reformation Sunday, instead of simply singing the praise of Martin Luther's teaching on justification by faith, or honoring his two-kingdom ethic that challenges us to live responsibly in a complex world? I raise this issue on Reformation Sunday because I am convinced there is too much hatred in our world today. Many otherwise good Christian people are tolerating the growth of this hate. We must do better as followers of Jesus Christ.

I am particularly concerned with the growing trend toward demonizing Islam and the temptation to equate all Muslim people with radical terrorism. Many of our fellow citizens act as if "being a Muslim" is awful and un-American. Good Christian people are listening to friends and neighbors say hateful things about Muslims and they are encouraging it through their serene passivity. Let us never forget: *All that is necessary for the conquest of evil is for enough good people to remain silent!*

Last Sunday former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, made a powerful statement about this American cancer of intolerance. With simple eloquence the retired four-star general addressed the current flurry of rumors, which claim that Presidential candidate Barack Obama is a Muslim. Powell said:

Well, the correct answer is, [Obama] is not a Muslim, he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that

he or she could be president? ... This is not the way we should be doing it in America. [Statement from *Meet The Press*, 10/19/08]

And Jesus said: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

I would challenge you on this Reformation Sunday to separate yourselves from all that is prideful, narrow-minded, arrogant, and dismissive of others. Among the many wise and wonderful things Martin Luther said was his challenge that every Christian should be a little Christ to his neighbor. To the best of our ability, we should do the things that Jesus did: *reaching out in love, feeding the hungry, binding up the broken, working to drive demons out of those places where they compromise the lives of people.* Someone has observed that Luther actually did not say we should be *a little Christ* to our neighbor, but rather we should simply *be Christ, the body of Christ*, alive in the world.

In a world that tries to assign us a value based upon our achievement ... how blessed we are that we can proclaim the clear and certain witness of our Reformation faith that we are made right by God, graciously, without our having earned it through personal accomplishment. As Luther put it clearly,

Faith brings you to Christ and makes him your own with all that he has for you. Love gives you to your neighbor with all that you have for him. Faith and hope are our attitudes toward God. Love is the resulting attitude we have toward our neighbor.

Our Reformation Heritage reminds us that we are in the world to love others .. not because they deserve it, or promise to reward us if we do. *We are called to love because God in Christ has first loved us.* This is what Luther discovered in a cold, dank monastery cell in Erfurt, Germany, a discovery that changed him forever and inspires us today.

So we remember Martin Luther this morning ... and we remember the process of reforming the Church that he began. Certainly we regret the continuing separation within the Church that diminishes the witness of Christians throughout the world. May it be our prayer that a greater unity may yet be known among the followers of Jesus Christ.

So let us live The Reformation Challenge to be a faithful people, who are committed to God, who are courageously involved in the world, and who manifest a faith that is constant and unwavering. I am convinced that we will find few better guides than God's obedient rebel, the little monk from Wittenberg. Amen.