

Ecclesia Semper Reformanda Est

In the name of him whose words are the truth that sets us free, dear friends in Christ: Today we commemorate what we call *the* Reformation, speaking specifically of the Reformation of the western Church that began (quite inadvertently) in A.D. 1517 when an Augustinian Friar in Saxony posted a notice in which he offered to debate the church's highly doubtful but even more lucrative practice of selling indulgences; indulgences being official certificates that promised the bearer some or all of the time off the many centuries long sentence of torture and punishment they had earned for themselves in Purgatory on account of their sins. These seemed to most folks to be a pretty good deal: spend a few ducats now and save yourself a lot of trouble later. Oh, and you could buy them for your dead loved ones who were in the process of being purged in Purgatory, as the salesmen advertised "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs". Who wouldn't do that for dear old mom and dad? They'd be sure to thank you later. Why, the church was so gracious even to have a sliding scale on the purchase price for indulgences. Wealthy dukes and earls had to pay a bundle, but common peasants could buy them on the cheap. Who could possibly have an issue with such a wonderful thing?

Well, Martin Luther for one. Besides there being no biblical basis for the practice (or even for the existence of a place called Purgatory where souls are sent to suffer before moving on into glory), Luther thought that telling people they had to pay for God's forgiveness sort of tended to obscure the simple truth of the Gospel – the Gospel that proclaims that sinners are justified freely by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. Funny thing is that a lot of people agreed with him. When they compared what God's Word actually says to what the church was saying and doing, they said, "I think Luther's got it right." And when that happened, the swollen river of cash that was pouring into the church's coffers through the sale of indulgences began to dry up. Before long it was reduced to a mere trickle.

It was the church hierarchy's heavy-handed response to Luther that caused him to question other unbiblical doctrines, traditions, and practices that also had the effect of putting Christ and his saving work the cross on the back burner (if not completely out of sight), while advocating instead all the supposed good things people could do to save themselves. Thus Luther and other theologians and lay people who were in agreement set themselves about the task of restoring to its proper and central place in the church the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and removing from the church all the things that had crept in over centuries that obscured it. It was a reformation: a good, godly, and much needed reformation.

But it's wrong to call it *the* Reformation. It was, in fact, one of many the church has undergone – if we understand the church to be the community of the confessing faithful, the people of God. Today's Old Testament reading tells of another much needed reformation that was launched in the year 715 BC when Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, ascended to the throne of Judah.

Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, was arguably the worst king in Judah's history. In the relatively short span of his 16 year reign, he managed to completely corrupt the faith and worship life of the nation. While paying outward lip service to the Lord, he also promoted a wide array of pagan religions, including the Canaanite fertility cults that were always popular with the people. He set up shrines and sacred gardens to these false gods all throughout the land. He even sacrificed one of Hezekiah's infant brothers on the burning altar of Baal.

If his theology and religious faith were completely messed up, his political sense was just as bad. When threatened with war by two neighboring nations, he struck a deal with the devil, so to speak. Though told by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah that the threatened war he so feared from his neighbors would never happen, he took it upon himself to voluntarily make Judah a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire, offering a huge annual tribute to be paid in exchange for their assistance in the defense of his country. Now, the Assyrians were some seriously bad actors, the Nazi Germans of their day. It was a really bad move on Ahaz's part; but he imagined himself pretty clever for making the deal.

Combining his bad theology with his bad politics, when Ahaz went to Damascus to meet his new boss, Tiglath Pileser, king of Assyria (think Adolf Hitler), he saw an elaborate altar on which that king made offerings to his false gods. Hoping to impress the Assyrian king with his loyalty, Ahaz sent instructions to his toady high priest in Jerusalem, a man named Uriah, to have one exactly like it set up in the Lord's temple. They were to shove the Lord's altar into a side corner and use this new altar to the Assyrians' false gods in its place. Uriah was only too happy to comply. He had a cushy, prestigious job and a big salary. He meant to keep them. And if that meant dishonoring the Lord and obeying his king, that was okay with him.

From other sources, we know that during the reign of Ahaz, the temple establishment in Jerusalem became mostly a money making machine for corrupt priests and religious leaders. (Hey, does that sound familiar?) We see that even good things were being used for evil purposes. The bronze snake made by Moses toward the end of the exodus is a good example. Recall what happened: in the desert the people of Israel were complaining to the Lord about the journey and the provision that he graciously provided. To adjust their attitude, the Lord sent venomous snakes among them. It's a technique that every parent can relate to: "You want to complain? I'll give you something to complain about." It worked. The people repented for their faithless grouching and asked that the snakes be taken away. Instead of removing them, the Lord left the snakes and gave the people a remedy for snakebite. He had Moses set the bronze snake on a tall pole in the camp. The Lord told them that when anyone was bitten, all they had to do was to gaze at that bronze snake and they'd be healed. It was, in that sense, an Old Testament Sacrament: that is, when the Lord ties a physical element to his Word and Promise.

Now, I don't think it's surprising that the Israelites kept this thing around for the 700 or so years since it was made. It was, if nothing else, a reminder of an important event in the salvation story of the exodus. And I don't know, maybe it still worked as a cure for snakebite. The problem was that it had become to the people an idol in its own right. They treated the bronze snake as if it were an object to be worshipped, like it had supernatural powers in and of itself. It didn't. What it had was the Word of God attached to it. That's where the power came from. Healing came from believing that Word of God. But they had scrapped the Word, and were worshipping the snake and making offerings to it – no doubt for a price.

All this nonsense King Hezekiah inherited when he came to the throne upon his father's death. Fortunately, he was an apple that fell from the tree and managed to roll a long way away – uphill even. As we heard, he set about removing the idols, their altars, and the other pillars and Asherah poles; these latter were phallic symbols that played a role in the orgies and cultic prostitution that was part of Canaanite religion. He even destroyed the bronze snake, calling it "Nehushtan", which means "thing of brass. It was his way of saying, "It's a chunk of metal, people; not a god to be worshipped."

But Hezekiah's reformation went far beyond simply removing idols and their accouterments. Three whole chapters of the book of 2 Chronicles are dedicated to detailing his

cleansing and restoration of the temple and his reorganization and retraining of the priesthood. He returned the nation to the proper worship of the Lord who forgave the sins of the people through blood sacrifices. He reinstated the annual Passover celebration that had been virtually forgotten, along with the other feasts, festivals, and observances that commemorated the Lord's long history of dealing graciously with his people. With respect to the Lord, Hezekiah got the nation of Judah on the right track again.

With regard to politics, he took the bold step of breaking the deal his father had made with the king of Assyria. To put it into perspective, this was like the smallest, weakest kid on the playground telling the biggest, baddest, most violent bully "You can't have my lunch money anymore." Hezekiah knew that wouldn't set well with the king of Assyria; but he also knew that the Lord had promised to defend his people. And he trusted that promise; trusted it even when that king sent an army a quarter of a million men strong to lay siege to Jerusalem. For a while things looked pretty bleak. But then one fine morning when the sun came up and the Assyrian buglers played reveille, they found that during the night 185,000 of their soldiers had died in their sleeping bags. A mighty fortress is our God indeed.

So, I hope I've shown you that the story of King Hezekiah's reformation is one worth retelling and remembering. But my main purpose in retelling it is to highlight my original point that the Reformation we are celebrating today is only one of many that have happened throughout the history of the church. To be sure, the church is always in need of reformation – which is what the fancy Latin title I've given this sermon says. Why does the church always need reforming? Because it's full of sinful people who are always in need reforming, people who have the inbred tendency to move away from the light of God's truth, who love darkness rather than light, who prefer lies to the truth, who want to justify themselves and their actions, who can be deceived, and who can deceive themselves.

Did you stop to wonder how King Ahaz was able to pretty much overthrow the right worship of the Lord and fill the land with idolatry in only 16 years? It's because he had a lot of willing accomplices in the people and the priesthood. It's because he gave sinners what they really want: no rules concerning morality, no need for forgiveness, and various methods by which they could manipulate the gods in their favor and so show themselves to be gods in their own right. And it's also because those who stood up for the truth (and there were some) were marginalized, ridiculed, shouted down, and driven out.

This is the way it always is. And this is why the church always needs reformation, always needs to be evaluating its doctrines, practices, and traditions in light of God's revealed truth. In the same way that we must examine ourselves daily under the microscope of the Law that reveals our sins and shows us our need for the Savior, so also we must be examining what the church is teaching, what standards it is upholding, what Christ it is proclaiming, what things it is doing to see that these things do indeed align with God's Word.

This is the big problem with the Roman church. It can't do that. Because of its doctrine that Peter (and his successors the infallible popes) is the rock upon which the church is built, and because Christ has promised that the gates of hell won't prevail against his church, they think that means that their church can never go astray. Therefore if their church is teaching or doing something, regardless of how unbiblical or contrary to the Gospel it might be, it has to be right.

But even the most cursory reading of Scripture shows that the church can and often does go astray. And when that happens, it needs to be reformed. It is precisely through the

process of *reformation* by *God's Word* that the Lord ensures that the gates of hell don't prevail against his church.

But I don't want to talk about the Roman church and its problems; I want to talk about ours. We've got problems too. Visit ten different churches in our own Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and you will see some of them. Confusions of Law and Gospel, overly loose communion standards, accommodations of the surrounding culture, lowered moral standards, fun to sing but theologically bad hymns ... I could go on; but I think I've made the point. And the problem is when someone identifies such a problem and wants to discuss it in light of God's Word, more often and not they are told to sit down and shut up, we don't want to talk about doctrine. Friends, there is nothing more important for the church to be talking about.

And that means here too, in my preaching and teaching, in our worship practices, in our Sunday school and at the Lutheran school, in your home devotions and prayers, we ought all to be continuously asking, "Is this correct according to God's Word?" And that necessarily means we have to know what God's Word actually says about whatever it is.

Jesus said, "If you *abide* in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Therefore let us be true disciples who abide in the Word of Christ. Let us read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest his Word to know and hold fast to the truth that sets us free, the Gospel of our salvation for the sake and by the work of Jesus, God's Son. For if the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!