

Sermon Luke 5:36-39

23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Reformation Sunday

October 27th, 2024

You know that I am a Lutheran, right? When I first considered serving you, the good folks here at Old Steeple, coming out of the Congregationalist's tradition, I thought, how different can it be? After all, we are all Protestants.

But I am realizing that 50+ years of being a Lutheran and serving for decades in Lutheran settings has wired me in a certain way. And I especially feel it today, Reformation Sunday.

Yes, many Lutheran churches celebrate Reformation Sunday today, which is the Sunday before the actual Reformation Day, October 31st. Because on October 31st, 1517, on All Hallows' Eve, Martin Luther (according to legend) nailed his 95 theses disputing Roman Catholic practices of the day to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and that kicked off the Reformation in Germany.

And so for the last 20+ years as a pastor, I would always go full out on Reformation Sunday, with 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God', of course, but that would just be the beginning of celebrating our proud Lutheran heritage.

And I have to admit: today feels a bit strange to me. Because doing that just wouldn't be appropriate here; that's not YOUR background, that's not YOUR heritage.

So in a sense I am dealing with new wineskins here, to use an image from today's gospel lesson. I can't just put the same-old, same-old, tried and true wine in there. It just wouldn't work – or not work well. And so, though I, like many, am a creature of habit, this old dog has to learn a few new tricks. I need to allow myself to be reformed in a certain sense. And while this might be challenging and slightly intimidating, I also think this will be fun and interesting.

At the same time, I have to warn you, for you can take this pastor out of a Lutheran church, but you can't get the Lutheran out of this pastor...

So this year, I want to approach Reformation Sunday and the whole concept of Reformation from a different angle. I don't want to lecture you on THE

Reformation, a historical event – but rather reflect on reformation in general, which is a non-capitalized, or minuscule, ‘r’.

Now reformation – re-formation – is something we find throughout the Bible. After God creates the world, the entire story between God and humanity is basically a story of reforming, of re-establishing relationships that are broken or disturbed, of new chances and new beginnings, over and over.

In our call to worship today, we heard God’s words which are among my favorite from the Bible: I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it, don’t you notice, don’t you get it?

Our entire Bible is book-ended with new beginnings – in the beginning, in Genesis, there is the creation. But then, in Revelation 21 and 22, a vision for the new Jerusalem - a realm where the gates are always open and all are invited to enter and the river of life flows and there is the tree with leaves for the healing of all nations and God is always present, and death and mourning and crying will be no more – I mean, what a vision!

God is not a static and stationary God sitting on some heavenly throne somewhere, but rather a God who constantly reforms, and does a new thing, and offers new life. Do we not perceive it?

And somewhere in this immense book-ended story of God and humanity, we have the story of Jesus Christ. Now talk about a new and reformed approach by God to get humanity’s attention. And Jesus Christ, his words and deeds, his life and death and resurrection, his mercy and grace and forgiveness and boundless love are like new wine that bursts any old and habitual preconceptions of God.

Now the interesting thing is: yes, God does a new thing in Jesus Christ. However, it’s not entirely radical. For, as you probably all know, new wine still comes from mature vines, and new wine from old vines is especially prized. The source, the root, of any new wine remains the same. God, who is from everlasting to everlasting, is still the root and source of all life and our entire being. Any newness happens within a realm of safety and security of God’s love and care.

And this brings us to this day, Reformation Sunday 2024. God is still speaking, God is still working, God is still doing new things. Case in point: Anyi and I are here now. Things will be familiar, but different at the same time around here. This is a

new chapter in the history of this congregation. Reformation is still happening today.

And while I think it's important to honor and savor the old wine of tradition and history in this place, in this congregation, be prepared for some new wine coming. And I know, Jesus says in today's gospel that nobody who has tasted old wine wants to drink the new – and, as a wine connoisseur, I concur with that, many wines get better with age – but new wine can also be exciting. Have you ever heard of Beaujolais Nouveau, literally the 'New Beaujolais'? It's the fresh wine from the French region of Beaujolais, and every year there's a craze about this new wine, because it's so good. And I remember from living in Germany that, each fall, stores would sell very young wine, in fact it was still fermenting, sold in special bottles that would allow the developing CO2 to escape. This is great stuff, light and bubbly and refreshing and easy to drink and just exciting. New wine can be great.

But, as Jesus warns us, any new wine can't just go into old and brittle wineskins. It cannot go into vessels that would be overwhelmed and damaged by this new wine. We need to be prepared, maybe reform our hearts and minds to a certain degree, and remain curious about and open to God's possibilities. Yes, this old dog has to learn some new tricks, now that I am serving you and serving with you – but at the same time you might have to learn a few new tricks as well. Like celebrating Reformation Sunday today.

God's entire story with humanity is about constant reformation. Reformation is still happening today. My hope and prayer is that we all, together, go with open hearts and minds onto this next stretch of Old Steeple's journey, and remain open to God's ever-refreshing and reforming and life-changing and life-giving Spirit; learning, together, what it means to be God's presence in this place and moment of time.