

Reformation Sunday (B)  
October 31, 2021  
Text: Romans 3:19-28

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day to honor our heritage and celebrate our identity as Lutherans. 504 years ago today, Martin Luther posted 95 articles for debate on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, objecting to church practices that he believed were unfaithful. He set events in motion that would lead to massive changes in the church and society, not only in Germany, but across Europe, with consequences of those changes continuing to shape Christian faith still today.

The challenges we face as Christians now, though, are completely different from those of Luther's time, and I've been wondering about what it might mean for us to be "heirs of the Reformation" in our secular, polarized, anxious time. I'm genuinely uninterested in celebrating Reformation Day as a "yea for our team" kind of day. Instead, it seems to me that there are certain core values that are part of our Reformation heritage that have a kind of power and clarity to address what kind of Christians we will be now, and how we will live faithfully through the uncertainties and dangers of our time. There are three slogans from the Reformation that I hope can give us a sense for those core values and what they might mean for us. They are: by scripture alone, by Christ alone, and by grace alone.

First, then: by scripture alone. For the reformers, this meant that over against any other claims to speak for God, they would recognize only the authority of the Bible—not popes or church tradition or anything else. There was definitely a polemical quality to this slogan. It rejected anyone or anything besides the Bible as an authority for making God known. I wonder, though, if we can recognize, behind the combative, line-in-the-sand quality of this slogan, an affirmation about where the roots of our faith are nurtured. We are rooted in the story of Israel and Israel's god, the story of release from captivity, the words of the prophets, the promise of new life—the story that leads to Jesus of Nazareth as the One who makes God's grace and mercy known. We are rooted in a story of forgiveness and hope and reconciliation. By scripture alone doesn't mean we are anti-science, or that we accept without thinking all of the attitudes and beliefs that come from the Late Bronze Age that are present in the Bible. Instead, we look to the Bible as the story of God's love for the whole human family. That is the story that guides us, not only in our spiritual lives, but also in how we live with our neighbors as God's people in the world.

We believe the story of the Bible is centered in Jesus, which brings us to our second slogan, by Christ alone. For the reformers, this slogan made clear that Christ alone served as mediator between humanity and God. There was no priest or church or ritual that was needed to bridge the gap between us and God. I wonder whether for us this slogan can affirm how Jesus defines for us what life with God is all about. There's a lot of religion in America that claims to be Christian, but doesn't look anything at all like Jesus. There is a style of Christianity that has replaced the Jesus of the gospels with someone that looks more like John Wayne—a kind of hyper-masculine, gun-toting defender of American capitalism. But the Reformation slogan, by Christ alone, brings us back to the real Jesus, who calls us to love our enemies, to forgive those

who sin against us, to resist the tug of wealth and possessions, to reject violence and follow in his way of service and humility and generosity. That real Jesus leads us in his work of healing the human family, which continues through our hands, our compassion, our gifts. And we will share that work with anyone, Christian or not, in serving the reign of God, where the human family is reconciled and every person is treated with dignity.

And finally, there is “by grace alone.” We affirm, along with our Reformation forebears, that God’s unmerited goodness is the only power that in the end matters in our lives. Our virtue, our achievements and accomplishments, even our religious fidelity—they are all empty gestures when it comes to standing before God. We put our trust only in God’s goodness, God’s mercy, God’s promises spoken over us at baptism, God’s eternal patience and God’s great love for us. “By grace alone” is really good news, because it sets us free from taking ourselves too seriously, free from any worry about whether we’re good enough or faithful enough. “By grace alone” invites us to live with great hope and great humility. If we’re ever tempted to compare ourselves to others, no matter whether the comparison is favorable or unfavorable, “by grace alone” reminds us that we have all fallen short of what God desires, but God has mercy on us all. “By grace alone” has a very helpful leveling effect. Regardless of the differences between us, we all stand in need of God’s grace. There’s no hierarchy of people who are better than others, or people God loves more than others. So when we look at our neighbors, “by grace alone” challenges us to see companions on the journey, fellow children of God, some of whom have been deeply wounded by life. Maybe they will need our compassion rather than our judgment. I wonder how “by grace alone” will shape what you value and what you will invest yourself in as you make your way through this life.

By scripture alone, by Christ alone, by grace alone. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany, these slogans were part of an explosive renewal and restructuring of a church that had become complacent, that had adopted the world’s values about wealth and power, and had given up on Jesus’ way of compassion and forgiveness. Our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are different in so many ways from what Luther experienced 500 years ago, but I believe these slogans can still pack real power for our lives—as long as we don’t domesticate them as just “religious” ideas, or bury them under a Lutheran cultural identity. I wonder what sort of changes we might experience if we brought scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone into all of our decision-making—for example, how we spend our money, or what sort of entertainment we enjoy, or how we use our free time. It might be explosive—in a good way, in a life-giving way. It might power a personal reformation for us! And it might help us see more clearly how God by grace wishes to be at work in our lives and in our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.