

Pastor John Rohde Schwehn
Sermon, Reformation Sunday, 2017

Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 8:31-36

Well the day has come – Reformation Sunday, 500 years after Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses to the door of a church in 1517.

And we could use such an occasion as an opportunity to really lift up our Lutheran pride, our denominational identity. After all, it was our guy – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther – whose church reform movement not only changed the world, but we are still using the guy’s name 500 years later. Lutheran.

But I’m here to tell you today, my friends, that your identity as a person of faith, as a follower of Jesus, in fact has *nothing to do* with how brushed up you are on Reformation history. Nor does it have to do with whether you can recite church doctrine or whether you have Luther’s small catechism committed to memory.

No – the good news of this day is much broader, much deeper, much more life-changing than the Lutheran label that we wear. The good news is that, in Christ, we have all been set free! By grace we are saved – not because we attend the right church or do the right things. We are saved because the God who we worship relentlessly and persistently seeks us out in love – to forgive us, renew us, and set us free.

In 2017, the Reformation for us today is not merely a question of, “What is the right way to believe?” but rather “Who am I – who are *we* – called to be?”

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples,” says Jesus in John’s gospel, “and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Another translation of these words of Jesus reads, “If you *abide* in my word...the truth will make you free.” Jesus, who is the word and the truth, tells us to abide in him.

Freedom means abiding in Christ, and abiding in one another. It does not mean abiding purely in a specific denomination or tradition – because, as Luther understood, sooner or later every ideology will simply find a way to enslave you. And people who are enslaved believe they need to work out their own freedom.

500 years ago, it was the Roman Catholic church's practice of selling indulgences that marked a certain enslavement. Luther posted those 95 theses specifically against this practice – a practice that taught that God's grace and salvation could be sold to the highest bidder, could be earned by giving to the church. Put some coins in, get forgiveness out.

And, church, if we're honest with ourselves 500 years later, I wonder whether a similar kind of enslavement hasn't slowly crept back in. On our best days, we trust that we are truly free in Christ and in each other. But then a certain kind of worry and anxiety and fear can creep in, as it has across the church, and we spend a lot of time talking in 2017 about church decline, cultural change, demographic shift.

Until, suddenly, like the Catholic church in Luther's time, we succumb to an understanding of church that says you have to put something in order to get something out. We're motivated not by a desire to spread the gospel, but by a feeling that it's all up to us. We start keeping points of who we like and who we don't, of who is a true church member and who is not.

Well that's not us, Christ the King. In 2017, we are called to *abide, abide, abide*. Abide in Christ. Abide in one another. This is where freedom is. Faith is not a Lutheran doctrine thing but a matter of the heart. It is relationship with God, and with fellow believers. We understand the good news of Christ most truly when we *feel it in our hearts*.

Forgive me, but I've put together some 2017 theses that might guide our church forward in these next days. I'm no Martin Luther, and that's a good thing. I won't give you 95 theses – instead, I'll try 9.5. I'd love to hear some of yours as we imagine how the good news of Christ might be calling us to live for the next 500 years.

Freed in Christ, we, the church, are called to:

1. Tell the truth. *Jesus Christ – the word incarnate – is how God tells us the truth of who God is: self-giving, unconditional, radical love. Jesus preached truth that was bad news to the powerful and good news to the poor and downtrodden. As followers of Christ, we must speak the truth in love to one another, and to the world: the truth of our brokenness, the truth of our fears, the truth of our joys and the truth of our struggles. Life is too short to hold our truth in the darkness, in private secrets and resentments; everything must be exposed to the light.*
2. Repent and Forgive. – *we all are sinners and every day we have the opportunity to begin following in the love of Jesus Christ all over again. Repent, therefore. Tell the truth of your failings, and ask for forgiveness. Forgive those who are hard to forgive. Practice reconciliation. Bury old resentments and live into the freedom won for you in Christ's resurrection.*
3. Be bold. Have courage. – *try out that crazy idea for ministry that you have been too shy to share. Abiding in Christ means there is no such thing as failure because we know that God will redeem it all. Speak out for what is right. Take risks, miss big, try again. Don't take yourself too seriously; remember: you are loved completely by the one who created you, and there's nothing you can do, no failure too big, to ever lose it.*

4. Trust that God is with you. – *Every day. At work. At school. In your retirement. In your questions. In your pain. In every season. Always. Period. Especially, God is with you in bread and wine and water and the Word, the most ordinary and little of things. Think about how odd this is. Rejoice in it.*
5. Recognize God in the stranger. – *Especially the stranger you are most suspicious of, the one you are most inclined to like the least. Remember that you are created in the image of God, but so are they. Let this fact confuse and unsettle you. Then go buy that person a cup of coffee and listen to their story. You won't regret it.*
6. Give generously. – *you don't own anything; everything, including your very life, is a gift. Don't let your giving be motivated by guilt or power or entitlement. Give out of the same abundance that God showers upon you every day. Give in order to further the gospel of Jesus Christ in this church, community, and around the world. Give of your gifts. Give of your time. Give of your money. Give extravagantly, and often.*
7. Never stop asking, “what does this mean?” – *Like Luther, be curious and ask questions. Wonder constantly at the mystery of your existence and the mystery of God's love that shines through you and through everything, everywhere.*
8. Embrace your calling to serve. – *We abide in each other. We need each other. This is freedom. Your vocation is to love God and to love your neighbors. Not just the neighbors who are like you, but all of them. Do not serve out of compulsion or because you think your salvation depends on it. It doesn't. Serve out of a joyful heart.*

9. Live in the foolish hope of the cross. - *Recognize the truth of the gospel, of the cross: that our hope is to be found precisely in the places of our greatest hopelessness – at the bedside of a loved one who is dying, by breaking bread with someone with whom you disagree, by showing up to rally for equality for all people. Luther famously wrote, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree today.” So, in the face of fear, plant an apple tree. Defy the darkness by being the light. Live in hope. Love the world.*

9.5 Be joyful. – *You are saved by grace. Everything has already been done. Know in your body and your heart that you are free, that you do not need to be afraid anymore, that all has been conquered by Christ, that there is nothing you have to do in order to earn God’s favor. Live in the joy of this promise. Go dancing at least once a month. Dive wholeheartedly into a hobby that nobody else understands. Learn some jokes. Laugh.*

Soon, we will *finally, officially* install our sister in Christ, Ana Becerra, as mission developer for Cristo Rey. Certainly this is a place where the Spirit is breathing life into our congregation and the whole church, reforming us. What a gift it is to be here, to be free in one another and in Christ. We are Christ the King. Somos Cristo Rey. By grace we have been saved. Period. Thanks be to God.