

# True Reformation

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for October 23, 1997

## Lessons for Reformation Day in Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34,

Psalm 46,

Romans 3:19-28,

John 8:31-36

---

Reformation. The birthday of the Lutheran church. The birthday of the *Protestant* church. The day we celebrate Martin Luther's nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, and sticking it to Rome and the Pope. The day we get in the faces of all the Catholics we know and say "NYAAH!"...and then count on the fingers of an amputated hand the number of Catholic friends we have left.

Reformation. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Lutheran pride, Protestant pride. Dredging up all the old reasons why we're right and they're wrong. Feeding the fires of a 500 year old debate.

Well, the old radio announcer in me (now there's something you probably didn't know about me!) would say, "EHNNT! Wrong answer! You lose! And what do we have for the departing contestants, Johnny?"

Well, what we have for you is better than the year's supply of Turtle Wax, the case of Rice-a-Roni (the San Francisco treat), or even a copy of our home game. What we have for you is the truth, and if you've been paying attention to the lessons, you know what that does for you.

While it's true that the date of Reformation Day is set based on when Martin Luther

posted his 95 theses and fired the shot that started the Protestant Reformation, even a cursory glance at the appointed reading will tell us that this is not what the focus of the day is. The readings don't talk about an institutional reformation, successfully completed, that we're on the "right" side of, and can smugly look down our noses at those who aren't on our team. No...they talk about something different, something better, and something not quite a done deal yet.

In the first lesson, Jeremiah says that God will make a new covenant with his people, one in which he will write his law on their hearts, and one where they will all know the Lord. This doesn't sound like an institutional reformation to me. It looks a whole lot more like a *personal* reformation, an *individual* reformation. A reformation in which the *people* are changed, and then perhaps the institutions and society are changed by those people. A people who have a better understanding of God's intentions for those institutions, a people who are not quite as clueless as we'd previously read about them being (you know, I've always wondered how, anyone after being led through the Red Sea, could just a little while later say, "Hmm, I'm not sure about this God of yours, Moses.>").

Has this day come yet? I don't think so.

At least I know it hasn't for me. I know *about* God. I know lots of things *about* God...from many different denominational and religious perspectives. And you know something? I'm tired of knowing about God. I want more, I want what Jeremiah talks about...I want to actually *know* God, personally, face to face, without centuries worth of interpretations and personal opinions getting in the way. Hasn't happened yet for me. Has it happened for you?

There are a lot of us out there who are doing the best we can knowing *about* God, and messing up in good faith along the way. There are people on opposite ends of the political spectrum, each with deep faith in God, and doing what they believe is the right thing based on what they've learned *about* God...and often disagreeing. Even disagreeing as to whether or not the other person is even following God because, well, "If you were, you'd obviously see things *my* way."

This is what reformation is about...not about a bureaucratic and theological reformation long done, but an individual one still in progress.

Do we boast because we're Lutherans, the first of the Protestants (or at least the first of the *successful* Protestants)? Do we use this day to swell up with Lutheran pride and drag out all those great hymns by Martin Luther that have served us and so many other Protestants so well for the past 500 or so years?

Paul might say, "By no means!" In fact, in his letter to the Romans, he said, "Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded!" After all, what do we have to boast about? Can we claim that we are absolutely right and the Catholics are absolutely wrong? I

don't think so. Can we at least be sure of where we're right and they're a little off? I'm not so certain about that either. I know that we can easily identify where we disagree, but can we really be sure that *they're* the ones who are wrong when it happens?

So then what *can* we boast about? Ironically, we can boast about being smart enough to know how stupid we are. We can boast about being smart enough to know that we need to be *reformed*. Notice what I said there...I didn't say that we need to reform (although I'm sure a lot of us need to do a bit of that too), I said that we need to be reformed, remade by God so that we can be like the image Jeremiah talked about. We know that we need to be reformed, and of that we can boast. We can also boast of a God who loves us enough to want to reform us...no matter how much it costs. And we all know how much it *did* cost.

So then what becomes of all those old arguments dating back from the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation? Well, there are a couple of things to consider...

Did you ever get into a heated argument with someone very close to you? Did you ever say some things in the heat of anger that you didn't really mean, and that if they were ever written down might be taken differently than you meant them by people who had no personal knowledge of the situation? Did you ever notice that you were maybe too stubborn to admit when someone else was right, and just had to keep justifying your position in order to save face, thinking that "If I give in on this, then there goes everything"?

Well, perhaps the same thing happened with all those things we've heard about the

Reformation. Yes, it's true that Martin Luther and the Pope threw quite a number of insults back and forth, but the writing doesn't always tell us whether they were being deadly serious or humorously sarcastic, and of course, wanting to ascribe total seriousness to an issue as important as religion, we don't even consider that maybe they were "only kidding" about some of the things they called each other in their anger and frustration.

But there's also another thing to consider...times have changed. Over the past couple of hundred years we've learned enough from each other to be at the point where one definition of a Lutheran is a Catholic who failed Latin and doesn't play Bingo. I think that Martin Luther would've felt right at home at Vatican II. Most of us have gotten past the point of saying things like "We shouldn't do that because it's a Catholic thing," and you know, if we avoided doing everything that Catholics did, we wouldn't be singing, praying, or even eating and breathing.

I once read that the very opinions that would've marked you as a card carrying Socialist back in the 20s and 30s are now very mainstream among today's Democrats and Republicans. And the same applies to our Lutheran/Catholic relationships. Over the years we've learned that so many of our "really big arguments" were merely just slightly different understandings based on different turns of phrases. Different interpretations based on different cultural backgrounds and cultural baggage, and which made perfect sense when you took that into consideration.

So what of the arguments of the past 500

years? Well, for the most part they are, and should be, ancient history. None of us now would think of carrying on family relationships based on a feud from four generations ago, and yet there are many of us who still insist on going back 500 years to make useless Lutheran/Catholic distinctions.

But back to that individual reformation...what today is really about. When I first glanced at the Gospel reading for today, I assumed that there were another few sentences in it that I was looking forward to using and talking about. When I later read it more closely, I found out that those sentences weren't there, but were, in fact in similar passages in Luke and Matthew. It's where John the Baptist is amazed by the crowds of people coming to him to be baptized and said, "Don't say to yourselves 'Oh, but we have Abraham as our ancestor,' because God is able to make new descendants for Abraham from these stones!"

It would've tied in perfectly with that Lutheran pride thing. So many of us say, "But we're good Lutherans, surely we please God." And yet before us there were those who said, "But we're good Catholics" and "But we're good Jews." Have we even noticed the pattern? Have we learned anything from it?

Again, our salvation is not based on *who* we are. That has been made clear. Instead we are to desire to be reformed, transformed even. And this reformation will enable us to see the truth...a truth which will in some cases show us where many of our deepest held opinions were mistaken, but a truth that will free us to serve God and each other better.

What is Reformation about? Perhaps at one time it *was* about changing the structure and practices of the institutional church, but as you've figured out by now, I don't think that's what it's about anymore. Because you see, changing the structure doesn't necessarily change the hearts of the people. No...the good news of Reformation is that we're looking at the kind of reformation that Jeremiah spoke about...one where *we* are changed, and then we change the church and the world around us.

And I want you to start thinking of reformation in this way too. Not as a day that

celebrates a done bureaucratic and theological deal, not as a day on which we try to draw attention to ourselves for being Lutherans (especially among those Catholics we know), but instead as something that we can look forward to having happen to each of us...that we might no longer teach each other or say to one another 'Know the Lord,' because we will all know him, from the least to the greatest, and he will forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more.

*This is the good news of reformation!*