

St James United Church



Message for October 26, 2025 Reformation Sunday

“The Core of Reformation Teaching” - Preached by Rev.
James Ravenscroft

Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14 and Andrew Rabot, “Wesley Didn’t Say It: Persistence and Preaching” as found on “Hacking Christianity” <https://hackingchristianity.net/2018/10/wesley-didnt-say-it-persistence-and-preaching.html>

Each year the Sunday before Hallowe’en is Reformation Sunday, October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his ninety-five theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg. He didn’t really take out a hammer and nail, instead sending a letter to the bishop, but the legend is much more dramatic. Regardless of how Luther got his ideas circulating, he set off a chain of events that continues to impact Christianity. Consequently, there are some of his thoughts and others’ too that I’d like to consider, especially as they relate to the readings we just heard this morning.

The first is the importance of faith. In this I don’t mean an assent of the mind. We often think that is what was meant by *sola fides*, but I believe it’s really about trust, about having confidence that God loves us so much that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are redemptive, overturn the predicament of the human condition. I’m not going to say how, because that continues to be debated by theologians centuries later but suffice it to say that in reaching out to us in Jesus, God brings healing, transformation, liberation to us, to the world.

This trust is what I see in our gospel, trust in God’s love as two people pray. Preachers often don’t say that, focused on the tax collector’s cry for forgiveness, but that framing can play into a transactional model of faith, one where we feel convicted at how sinful we are, how in need forgiveness, so God gives it, especially once we’ve accepted Christ into our heart. This overlooks that the initiative starts with God, has always started there, God creating us to share relationship, one with God, and each other. The tax collector isn’t alone in wanting that. The Pharisee does too, prays out of that relationship and his trust in what God set in motion, naming how he has tried to express what nurturing that relationship looks like as he fasts and tithes. We sometimes write these off as “works righteousness,” like the Pharisee is trying to earn something. But to use an analogy, that suggests that when I first met Glen, bought him a teddy bear to remember me when I returned to The Pas or would call him up, or all these years later buy him a present, or do the dishes, or thank him for supper, I’m trying to earn his love, rather than simply expressing my love for him and nurturing what we share. That’s what the Pharisee is doing. The tax collector too, but in his case, he realizes that his colluding with the Romans hurts those around him, betrays his relationship with them and so with God, hence him praying for forgiveness. God loves both people. The tax collector is justified because he needs to be, forgiven, his heart healed so that he can turn his life around, so that he can live in a more loving way.

That speaks to another Reformation teaching, albeit one not given momentum for 200 years until John Wesley took it up, a teaching rebuffed by many leaders as hinted in his journal, but one that

people needed, still need, to hear. I alluded to this teaching earlier in how our relationship with God begins with God, with their initiative. I'm speaking of prevenient grace, the idea that God is always reaching out in love as they forgive, heal, create, strengthen, guide, all to which we are free to respond or not. This gift of love is for everyone and everything. It sustains us and as we respond to it, becomes a renewing, sanctifying power in our lives, our hearts open to God's Spirit. Whether God's grace is grace, so whether it is prevenient or sanctifying, it always heals, like what we hear in Joel as the earlier ecological disaster is left behind and the winter rains come as before. To return to the gospel, this renewing love, this healing grace, not only helps the tax collector vocalize his need for forgiveness, but as I said earlier, would enable him to turn his life around, to be more loving, which may include, fasting and tithing and other spiritual practices the Pharisee referred to in his prayer, ways to nurture his relationship with God, and grow in love.

Now you may argue in this moment that Jesus seems pretty upset with the Pharisee in the story. And he is, but not because he is a Pharisee. Suggesting that leans into anti-Jewish sentiment. We need to be cautious of that, especially as we affirm the Reformation, some of Luther's writings being quite antisemitic and fuelling later antisemitic violence. Nor did Jesus judge the Pharisee for fasting, praying, tithing. Those are all things Jesus would commend. The issue Jesus has with the Pharisee is his judging others, including the tax collector. This is something we can fall into as well, have done historically, judging others, including their faith practices, as Catholics or Methodists or Anglicans, or more recently as Jewish or Muslim or any other religion. We end up doing the very thing that Jesus condemns.

It also feels like a betrayal of the final insight of the Reformation, one grounded in the reading from Joel as God promises to pour out the Spirit on all people, on younger and older, free and enslaved, and if we extend it, on Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic and everyone in between, all given grace equally. This promise is the foundation of a fundamental Reform teaching - the priesthood of all believers, that we're all loved and graced without reference to status or role, no one better than any other, all graced because all equally need God's healing, forgiveness, liberation, our judging of others proof of that. There is no need to make our differences an issue when at their core Luther's theses boil down to the relationship that God wants with us and that we can have with God. Our practices are just ways we nurture that relationship and from that come to love others more deeply. The fruit of that love is seen in how we treat others, our unity, not focusing on our differences.

On this Reformation Sunday we affirm the moment five hundred and eight years ago that Luther mailed his letter to a bishop and set off an historic chain of events. The greatest impact was the precedent it set for believers to break with one another over variations in belief. Perhaps it is time for an ecumenical reformation, where we focus on what we share. After all, the insight that got the ball rolling was the primacy of faith, not of the mind but of the heart, faith in God's love, God's grace, God's desire to be in relationship with us, and from that for us to be in relationship with each other. May that be the one teaching that grounds us in our prayer, the one teaching in which we all place our trust. Amen.