Text: Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36, Reformation Day

**Introduction**

I want to start with a couple of notes. The first note is that a good portion of this sermon I cannibalized from some of my prior Reformation day sermons. This is something – whether out of pride or my own appeal to works of the law – I try to avoid. And usually it is easy, because I look back at what I was doing even a year ago, and it just doesn’t work. Sermons are of the moment things – the Word for this people in this time and this place.

But part of this time and place I think is something of a waking up. The 500th anniversaries of the various reformation events started in 2017, the 500th anniversary of the hammer blows, the 95 theses, but then covid happened. The 500th anniversary of the Diet of Worms – the place of the phrase “Here I Stand, so help me God” comes from - passed without much notice, the word still yelling over a virus and everything associated with it. It was an interesting Satanic ruse to avoid spending time looking at the Reformation and Luther’s Words in any meaningful way. It is something that Satan has been pretty good at on past big anniversaries as well.

So, what does Reformation day celebrate? Some of that depends upon if you are talking about Europe or America. We’re all American, so I’ll just cut off the Nationalism that was often attached to the Reformation in Europe. Luther the great hero of the German people.

For a lot of years in America I think Reformation Day represented a kind of Protestant Triumphalism. These were the years of the Protestant Mainline and all its forerunners. The US tolerated Catholics and other religions, but it was a Protestant project. No, there was not an established religion, but there were appropriate ones. Warren Harding was the first Baptist President in 1921. There has never been a Lutheran one. As a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh which houses Heinz chapel, I used to joke about how the founders of the Ketchup company were Lutheran. You can find their names is good Gothic Script in stained glass in a couple of Lutheran churches in the area. By the time they built Heinz memorial chapel on the campus, before Pitt went public, they were Episcopalian. Reformation Day in my earliest memory was a celebration of what enlightened Protestants had built. Which worked, until the decrepitude of that protestant mainline could no longer be overlooked.

There was a secondary strain, less religiously connected, that took Reformation Day simply as a celebration of liberalism. Shuffling off the specifically Protestant stuff, the Reformation Whig history is it was the shuffling off of everything that bound reason and progress. It was the leaving behind the Dark Ages and superstition for freedom. Historian James Simpson writes, “liberty of conscience…the growth of individuality and interiority, and personal unmediated access to your God.” Not the celebration of Protestant Triumphalism, but the Triumph of the individual, reason and toleration.

But neither of those two celebrations are reflective of what happened in say 1517 to 1530. 1517 was the famous hammer blows, Luther nailing 95 these up to the Castle Church door. And the printers more or less taking those theses down, translating them and selling penny copies that circulated everywhere. What Luther said in those 95 theses was not simple. For example, take the first three theses:

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said “Do Penance”, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.
3. Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work diverse mortifications of the flesh.

Remember, entrepreneurial printers were printing off penny broadsheets and selling these theses to common peasants. To make those broadsheets popular sellers, those common peasants had to both understand something about the then current sacrament of penance, the biblical story of Jesus’ proclamation to “repent, the Kingdom of God is near”, and had a developed religious sense of the gulf between a ritual and the inward state of the heart…and more important, they had to care about those things and spend a penny. Luther’s theses asked them to think and reflect. They asked them to care about theology and how it could or should guide our lives. A true theology would not accept clinking some coins into a box for an indulgence, so that one could go on indulging the flesh. A theology that heard the proclamation of Jesus – “Repent, the kingdom is near” – would bear fruit outwardly and would desire to mortify the flesh. The ritual would not stop here, but would be reflected in their lives.

What happened from 1517 to I’m picking 1530 – the date of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, the no return date of the Reformation – was people did hear, and they did care.

**Text**

And the core of that caring was Luther’s recovery of the Apostle Paul. Captured in what Luther would call the distinction between Law and Gospel.

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speak to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” When we are confronted with any law, what do we naturally do? I think the answer is look for the loopholes. Who is my neighbor? If I can shrink my neighbor down to a manageable number, maybe I can keep the law to love my neighbor as myself. Maybe there are people I can declare infidels or enemies or slaves who how I treat them doesn’t matter because they are outside the covenant or are property. It is an attempt to hold the law to its first use only, the civil use.

But Paul, and Luther’s recovery of Paul, says that this doesn’t work. The law tells all of our inner lawyers to shut up. The law tells us that we are all accountable to God in the law. And that the law has a second use – the religious use – a mirror – that shows us we have all fallen short. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The purpose of the law to sinners isn’t that we can keep it. We can’t. (I fought the law and the law won.) The purpose of the law for sinners is so that we know we are sinners. The law increases the trespass.

That was Luther’s anfechtung – his struggle, his affliction. The Papacy at the time, had turned the sacraments of the church into further laws. Instead of repent – a recognition of our sinful state, do penance – try and make it up with religious works. And if your penance was too great, buy an indulgence. If you felt a good filial piety toward your dad, buy a mass for his soul in purgatory. If some guilt was afflicting you, go on a pilgrimage, visit some relics – and pay their keepers – as a work of consolation. If none of that works, become a monk – and carry out the evangelical councils – live in poverty, chastity and obedience. Be holy as God is Holy. And Luther, by contemporary accounts if not later invective, was a very good monk. But it was a pile of works. And the more he tried to follow it – to follow the law, the more he was aware of his trespass.

We moderns psychologize this. We adopt William James’ terms of a sick soul. Healthy people don’t think this way. But that is just our modern method of trying to shrink the problem of the law. We gladly admit that everyone is our neighbor, but only the mentally unstable get overly concerned about people far away. Just do what you can. But this I think is part of the “woke” problem. It is sick souls rejecting that healthy-minded temperament of doing what you can. Their core charge is that the entire system is sick, racist, sexist, whatever -ist you want to add. And in the natural religion – the religion without Christ, there is no relief. Just like Luther. The Sin only grows, you can’t absolve it without the cross, there is no justification in natural religion. Only grief. The trespass only becomes more apparent. In our woke state, there is no balm in Gilead. There is only doing penance, doing the work.

This was Luther’s other recovery. The bottle of 200 proof grace. “Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law…the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Works of the law, works of any law. Whether that be penance and indulgences, pilgrimages and relics, or BLM protests, anti-racists baby and intersectionality, are meaningless. You will not become righteous by them. The righteousness of God, the only righteousness that counts, comes by faith in His work. And it is given freely. “All have fallen short of the glory of God, and all are justified by his grace as a gift.”

Yes, the world is systemically terrible. It is called sin. It is called original sin. We all have it. And if you catch the law, you will see how monstrous it is. What Reformation Day is really about, is waking up to that reality. Caring enough about that, not to double down and just work harder, but to stop and look. That cross has shown us the depth of systemic terribleness. We killed The Perfect Man. And we said we were justified doing so. And we will do it again, and again and again. But that cross also testifies to God’s love. What we did out of evil, the Father took for Good. “God put him forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

**Application**

That is what Reformation Day is really about. The Law and the Gospel. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and your will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Those peasants who bought penny copies of Luther’s writing cared about that Word. They took it to heart. And it set them free.

Reformation Day isn’t about any of the ways we like to pat ourselves on the back. Reformation Day is the day we admit we are pretty terrible, but God has loved us anyway. And as long as we are in that Word – we are free. We have been set free by the son. Not set free to sin. But set free for the truth.

You have been made an eternal member of the household of God. Not a slave, but a brother. Not because you deserved it, but because it was His desire. So live like it.

If you have ears to hear that word and abide in it, Repent, for the Kingdom of God is here, ofr you. Amen.