

DEUTERONOMY 34:1-12

PSALM 90:1-6, 13-17

I THESSALONIANS 2:1-8

MATTHEW 22:34-46

Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost; Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 29, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Reformation Confirmation!

I wonder what it was like on what was perhaps a typical European fall day, with turning leaves and dreary and gray, overcast skies. Imagine the looks on people's faces, the reaction when they turned aside, strolling about town, going about the business of their daily routines, yes, with many a care in thw world, suddenly coming face to face, gazing intently at the great sight before them that demanded their attention. What radical writings glared before them. Imagine their surprise, the shock and awe, a mix of emotions mostly consumed by fear, as they approached the doors of the Castle Church, Wittenberg, Germany, and saw the most recent posting. Of course, most of them were illiterate and could not read these eventual historic words. But some could! Their tones were hushed and covered as they muttered to one another, murmuring in whispers that revealed whatever discomfort or glee, whatever thoughts and feelings were welling up inside them. Oh, the Wittenbergers were used to reading about local happenings, the kinds of events that have always taken place among the citizens of any community, especially the smaller ones, you know, community things, average, everyday, ordinary goings on. But, perhaps this poster appeared to be a little larger, a little different than the rest, sticking out like a sore thumb, far more articulate, detailed as if long considered, as if the composer had long pondered these things in his heart and mind. They were carefully ordered numerically, arranged just so, as if someone had taken an inordinate amount of time deliberating and then putting pen to paper, writing what became for posterity these critical concerns, each thesis thoughtfully articulated. Surely there were a lot of doubletakes with that hand-over-your-mouth expression that

says a mouthful, vain attempts to hide whatever reaction is being illicit in a moment in time. My hunch is that some were frightened, their closed Christendom world being shattered before their eyes. While perhaps others had a wry smile, someone daring to print what a few had long thought but would never dare utter, knowing the brutal consequences of challenging authority of the worst kind, the religious kind.

Who dared write these critiques of mother Church and had the audacity to publish, to put them on public display for common view, emphasis on common, as in these mostly commoners. Oh yes, it was customary to publically present various causes for debate. As in New England Congregationalist towns a bit later, the local Roman Catholic Church was located in the heart of town and was the center of communal concerns, the usual location to initiate dialogue. But these ninetyfive theses were not designed to stimulate ordinary conversation, reinforce dogmatic doctrine already cemented into the minds of the fearfully faithful. No, these issues were not intended to parrot Rome's ongoing fleecing of the flock, the sale of indulgences, probably Luther's tipping point, among the most perverse abuses dominating the church scene in medieval Europe at the time, a convenient and guilt-induced way to insure the heavenly journey for a soul stuck in purgatory, all concocted to pay for the massive structure called St. Peter's Basilica. The horror of Luther's manifesto, criticizing the only recognized one, true, apostolic, Catholic, with an upper case "C", Church, constituted an egregious no fly zone, completely out of bounds and off limits. These were not just polite suggestions, but were condemnations! And just who was it that was throwing these rocks and not-so-glass houses? It was none other than an insider who knew the proverbial secret handshake, the one who by virtue of position and through the power of papal authority bequeathed by the local bishop, now wielded the immense power granted to each local steeple, each one a subsidiary of Roman Catholicism. Yes, it was from the hand of a humble monk, an ordained priest, pontificating in his own right, by his own recently discovered freedom of conscience, who unleashed the hounds. Luther was the least likely to hurl any negative salvos, the most unlikely to attack what had become a heavily entrenched institutional juggernaut. As quickly as you could say All Hallows Eve, all bets were off, the foundations shaken to their core, the seemingly immovable human-crafted but bedrock doctrines incriminating themselves, rocking the

ecclesial insular world of the Roman Catholic Church, the cornerstone crumbling as if struck by a missile. Luther, Martin Luther, had fired the first shot and landed a direct hit, an arrow over the bow and through the heart of Christendom's only conceivably valid house of cards. It was not a knockout punch, but it certainly hurt, a TKO, a technicolor knockout in every way imaginable.

Once upon a time there lived another reformer, a peasant carpenter's son, you know him well, he who would become the quintessential example of reforming ingenuity, a reformer of reformers, yes, the one who set the mark, the high standard, a bar never before or since attained. Aim high! Reach for the stars and you just might come close to that rarified air. As we celebrate a rich heritage of Reformation, Protestant Reformation, "protest" being the operative word here, we are also celebrating Confirmation, confirming three very fine candidates in Ayla and Iland and Wyatt. As I pondered words to mark this day in time, another unofficial liturgical observance, I could not help but think of how appropriate it is to mix the metaphors of Confirmation and Reformation. With every new Confirmand that the Church and the churches affirm, we join with them as they join with us in the ongoing task of the Church's evolution, the change necessary to maintain relevance in this intellectually curious, critically thinking, postmodern world. Jesus honored the faith tradition of his birth, but in his desire to fulfill the law, not to abolish it, he brought much needed reformation that took the Judaism of his day full circle. Yes, right back to its hospitable roots! Out with rules and "regs", stifling and suffocating regulations, and in with the foundation of the faith, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being," your very soul, "and with all your mind," a part of the equation that much of Christendom either forgets, avoids, or ignores. "And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend," literally hang, "on these two commands." As the Hebrew Bible declares in the Law, it is clear that neighbor equals and includes those who were divinely singled out as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, meaning any and every body. This was Jesus' reformational mission! Martin Luther saw up close and personal that the Church had perverted the idea of works, making them a fear factor, focusing on the care and comfort of a few, and not serving the needs of those who were in need, in the direst of straits. Luther put faith back into the equation. Where there is no balance of faith and works

faith does not work and there really is no faith. There is always going to be a major problem in any Christian religious dynamic, no matter the brand! Jesus did not desire or intend to create something new, but instead sought to refresh, to renew, to restore, to reform, yes, to resurrect something old. So it was with Luther!

It is my hunch that reformation of any significance or substance, any import whatsoever, is always threatened when fear dominates faith, when fear dictates the order of the day. My hunch is that there were countless Jews in Jesus' day who deeply desired, who longed, to join his small and merry band of disciples, but who simply could not count the cost, the risk of turning their back to the plow way too great. Many in leadership, Pharisses in particular, knew in their hearts and minds that Jesus was more than a rabbi, but indeed, a man sent from God, so said Nicodemus, but their status was too great, their possessions too precious, their positions too powerful. Martin Luther's movement caught on quickly, riding a wave of dissatisfaction, but no doubt there were those who cheered him on but did so from the sidelines, the fear of reprisal, of retribution, an overwhelming fright that kept them at bay, not allowing them to join the parade and the party, to join the throngs who literally had endured enough. My hunch is that if there were collusion with Rome to have Jesus executed that it was carried out by many who, in theory, supported his cause, but were too fearful of the consequences, for themselves or for their fragile détente with Rome. Just a hunch!

Many of us grew up with these kinds of fears, threatened with the eternal damnation of our souls complete with the fire and brimstone of hell if we did not toe the line, parrot the professions, confess the confessions. In my youth, if I had dared say half of what Aylan and Iland honestly and proudly read to you this morning from their articulately crafted papers, I would have never been allowed to be baptized. I would have never been encouraged to think outside the box the way these Confirmands have been invited to think and to share. In their transparent words there is no hint of coercion, no indoctrination, no recitation, no, just what has been revealed to them through the still speaking Spirit of God. To echo the newest United Church of Christ Confirmation materials, this sacred act, yes, sacramental in its own "rite", is about confirming, not conforming. Those

days are dead! No eulogy or flowers on their grave needed! We had always heard that we were the Church's future and there is always some truth in that mythology, knowing we would eventually carry the torch as we served in local churches, as clergy and as laity. But we were still trapped, bound in the theological prisms that gave us the narrowest viewpoints, far more blinded than Paul's proverbial dark glass through which we can at least remotely see outlines and possibilities. These kids being confirmed today, with countless others who are still amazingly attracted to the steeple, attached in some way to the Church in its local expression, they truly represent a turning point, the future of a postmodern Christendom that indeed, is returning to the roots, the rock from which it was hewn, not Peter, that rock, an ecclesial institution that has often been the millstone for many, but the rock of faith that is foundational, the affirmation of all people, the love of God and neighbor and self. If love is not the defining quality in our ecclesiology and our theology, if it does not meet the smell test, it will no longer suffice, is no longer valid or relevant and will thankfully become a part of the ecclesial dustbin of history. In these journeys you have heard from Ayla and Iland today you are getting a great sampling of the future of what has come to be known as progressive Christianity. Is it new? Is it innovative? Is it revolutionary? No, it has been around for quite some time. It has been here all along! Only now we seem to be pulling this extravagant love and welcome thing out of mothballs. Love of God, neighbor, and self, is the ultimate, the totality, the very essence of the gospel at its most pure form! In this reformation we are not creating but are retuning to the radical way of Jesus, the way of love infused by infinite grace, peace, and mercy, all leading to the abundant life. We are learning, the more we read these ancient biblical texts, that the man of history in Jesus, loving in every way, accepting and affirming, "extravagantly welcoming," expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and yes, vulnerably open, is very different from the cosmic Christ of faith eventually demanded by the early Church with heaven and hell as realistic carrot and stick alternatives. Hell can wait! Our salvation, whatever constitutes that theological (soteriological) expression, is grounded in the way we treat one another, love of God and neighbor being inseparable, to use an image from last week, two sides of the same coin. The bottom line is that theology can be reduced to one very important thing and one thing only, that love of God and love of neighbor and love of self is supreme, above all else, and to "heck" with the rest of it!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to reformation, confirming within us all that we are loved as images created in the very image of God. Amen and amen.