

REMEMBERING THE REFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

We would not be doing what we are doing here this morning if Martin Luther had not done what he did on the last day of October in the year 1517. You may remember what he did. You may recall that he posted an invitation on the door of his church in Wittenburg, Germany. It was an invitation to the scholars of the church to come together in order to debate and discuss ninety-five propositions concerned with various things in the church of that time. You may not remember exactly what all of these ninety-five propositions had to say other than that they had something to say about Indulgences. You do know this much however that the western branch of the Christian Church was split in two about four hundred and fifty years ago; that it has been divided ever since between Protestants and Roman Catholics; that the man who struck the match to the movement that caused the split was Martin Luther, and that the match so to speak, was the notice that he nailed on the door of his church in Wittenbrug, Germany on the last day of October in the year 1517.

Therefore, we cannot come together on a Sunday morning like this without remembering the Reformation. All of us have been influenced by it in one way or another, and we would not be holding this service the way we are today if the Reformation had never taken place.

WE CANNOT GLOAT OVER IT

One thing we cannot do is to gloat over it. It disturbed me, and perhaps it disturbed some of you too, to read in the NY Times last Sunday where a group of conservative and fundamentalist bodies within the Protestant Church were planning to use this Reformation Day observance as an opportunity to stir up anti-Catholic rallies in connection with the forthcoming presidential election. To use this great Reformation Day observance for any kind of partisan political purpose is certainly to my way of thinking, a perversion of the occasion. And I personally would not want to be identified with any branch of the Protestant Church that had this in mind. We cannot gloat over it. We ought not to gaze at it with any sort of malignant satisfaction. As a matter of fact, in a very real sense we should remember it with deep regret. We deeply regret that the Christian Community came to the point where it had to be broken in order to be purified. We are grieved by the fact that it is still broken, broken into more fragments than ever before. Everyone of those fragments is a witness to the human weakness of the Church of Christ. Everyone is an illuminated sign to the world that the church is not what Christ intended it to be. No matter how proud we are of our own denomination no matter how loyal we are to the various denominations represented in this congregation which have nourished our own spiritual life over the passing years, we are forced to acknowledge the fact that denominations and divisions within the church dissipate its influence dilute its effectiveness in the world and are an open declaration to the world that Christians do not love each other the way that Christ commanded they should. Far from gloating over the Reformation, we 20th century Christians are grieved by the fact that it had to happen at all. This is the first thing we think about when we remember the reformation.

THE REFORMERS DID NOT START A NEW RELIGION

The second thing we need to remember about the reformation is this. The reformers did not start a new religion. They were attempting to reform a Church that had already been in existence some fifteen hundred years. In other words, the churches of the reformation did not start from scratch. They had the Bible to begin with. They had the classic creeds of Christendom. They had the Sacraments and the liturgy. Sometimes we Protestants forget that we have gifts and glorious memories from the Church before it was divided. No Protestant is completely separated from any Catholic.

We sometimes speak carelessly of Catholicism and Protestantism as if they were two different religions. I remember several years ago visiting the city of Rome, and one of the highlights of the week I spent in Rome was a trip underground through the catacombs. It was fascinating to explore these subterranean vaults. A priest of Rome served as our guide and he attempted to answer all of our questions. There were a dozen or so people in the group. There was one lady in the group that asked a great many questions. She was an American, and her accent identified with one of the larger states in the Union. The priest pointed out to us some of the bones and relics of the early martyrs, and it was at this point that this lady asked another of her questions. "Are those bones of Catholics or bones of Christians" she asked. And the priest with something of a twinkle in her eye replied, "Why madam this was back in the time before they made the distinction". Yes, sometimes we speak carelessly of Catholicism and Protestantism as if they were two different religions.

We need to remember especially at this time in our own country that there is something greater than either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism, namely Christianity, and that we are both Christians. And I think it would clear the air of the religious world if we Protestants could help to get across to our Catholic friends that we worship the same God they do, that we believe in the same Incarnate Lord, that we try to live by the same Divine pattern; that we nourish our lives on the same set of scriptures. And if Roman Catholics could make it plain to the Protestants, that in spite of great differences of ceremony and ritual, in spite of significant differences of doctrine and polity, they are nevertheless servants of the same Master we serve. If we could make this plain to each other, it would soon be made plain to the world, and the Christian witness to Jesus as the Way and the Truth and the Life would be united in spirit instead of divided.

The fact that the western church was split in two in the 16th century is not our responsibility, but the fact that Catholics and Protestants in the 20th century are often at logger heads with each other, jealous of each other, make outrageous statements concerning each other - this I think is something of our responsibility. To be sure the ecclesiastical gulf between us is great and in the foreseeable future, at least, fixed; but the spiritual gulf between us can be and has often been bridged from both sides by Christians of goodwill. And unless we are at least willing to look in the direction of bridging those differences that separate us, then we have no right to call ourselves faithful followers of him who gave his life for us.

THE CHURCH ITSELF CAN LOSE CHRIST

The third thing we realize when we remember the reformation is that the Church itself can lose Christ. We know this because it happened. By the 16th Century, it had lost the moral insight of Christ in the mechanical machinery of the church and the penitence of the peasants became a source of profit to the nobles. Hence the Reformation. The Church itself like any other household had to be cleaned from top to bottom. The accumulation of centuries had to be sorted out and some of it had to be discarded in order that once again the person of Christ could be seen in his real nature. It is well for us to remember this because what happened then can happen now and I fear is happening in many churches across our land. The Church can and does so easily become cluttered with a multitude of things that hide the real thing and slow down its movement. It has to be cleaned more than once every thousand years. It ought to be cleaned regularly.

Perhaps you can see that we have, in our own minds, jumped from the 16th to the 20th century and now we are asking ourselves whether or not our Protestant Churches are in danger of losing Jesus right now. To be sure, from the point of view of numbers and membership, the American Protestant Church is thriving. Membership is growing by leaps and bounds and a multitude of activities are carried on and yet I can't help but wonder whether in it all and through it all Christ is getting lost in the shuffle. Have our churches become so much a part of the American way of life, so dominated by experts of promotion and publicity, so active in organization and good works in the community, that there is no quietness, no time for silence, no prayers as the practice of the presence of God, no real training in devotion, no Bible reading, no serious effort to save the people in the world from the very things that threaten to destroy them.

Of course, I am not in a position to make any general statements about this, but I put it to you this morning as something to think about. What about your church? What about our church? Is it a church in which people meet God, or do they just meet other people? What about the fellowship of those in the church who come together in the name of Christ, is there anything distinctive about their fellowship together that would make different from secular fellowship organizations. And are the people in the church easily spotted as Christians wherever they go, or are they the kind of people who perhaps provoke the comment, "Well, if you want to keep away from rows and wrangles and avoid gossip and controversy, then just steer clear of that church". I think I've said enough to make clear what I mean. The Church is always in need of reformation. Perhaps we should say transformation. And never more so than right now. Our churches are right now crying out to be transformed from social halls and business offices and recreational centers into houses of prayer, where men can worship God and then go about their work with a new vision and an altogether different motive.

JESUS IS THE WAY

Some of you by now may have anticipated the last thing that I am going to say about the Reformation. I think what needs to be done today in the church is quite different from what needed to be done in 1517. People then were scared to death of God and would pay almost anything to escape his punishment. People today are not frightened of Him. What happens after death is of no great concern to the majority of

Americans today as I see it. People today are more frightened of public opinion, of taking a stand. People today are frightened of poverty, of old age, of death. People today are frightened of not succeeding, frightened of an empty life, frightened of the meaninglessness of existence. By and large they have lost sight of the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some of have lost him in the class room, some among the turbines and missiles, some among the stars, some in the labyrinthine ways of their own minds.

We cannot take a text out of the Bible and hang it before you the way that Martin Luther did. "Justification by faith" were the words that Luther put before the people of the 16th century. It was like the blast of a trumpet and the people responded and rallied when they heard the call, but those same words have little meaning for most modern day Americans. To be sure the Gospel is the same, but the situation is different. Our task is even more difficult. We have got to draw it out of the Bible, out of the Church where we find it, and communicate it - by sacrament, by word of mouth, by example, by whatever means we can to the hands stretched out before us. You ask are there any words that will speak to people today. I think so, and I am bold enough to suggest them to you. "Jesus is the way"

Too simple you say. Too simple for the theologians. Too simple for the average American church goer. Mind you those words were not too simple for James and John, for Peter and Andrew. Not too simple for Paul. For Francis of Assisi, Thomas a Kempis, John Wesley, George Fox, Abraham Lincoln, Phillips Brooks, Albert Schweitzer.

Jesus is the way. Those words are not too simple if you remember that Jesus is not only the way to live, but also the way things are - the way of God's reconciling love, the way of God's coming to us, the way of our approach to God, the way to suffer, the way to pray, the way to treat our friends and our enemies, the way to love and the way to forgive. He is the way. The only way. There really is no other way that leads to life.

LET US PRAY:

Help us, O God, to see Jesus; to see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly; that his life and spirit may be in us as it was in thy servant Martin Luther. Amen