**Our Reformation Legacy**

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017

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On a Sunday afternoon last December, as many of us were preparing to go Christmas caroling, I found myself in a friendly debate with one of you. The question was something like “what were the five most important human innovations in the course of western history.” I have to admit that the Reformation did not initially make my top five list. I came up with: Monotheism, Money, Democracy, gunpowder, and the semiconductor. My conversation partner made a very strong argument for including the Protestant Reformation. I wasn’t buying it at the time – important yes, but top 5? I’m not so sure.

A year later, as I’ve been chewing on the question, I think I’ve been persuaded and am now ready to revise my list to include the Reformation. It’s a bit of a cheat because to make room in the top five, I’m removing Monotheism, on the grounds that it was not technically a human *innovation*, more like a human acceptance of a divine truth!

I think it’s hard to comprehend from the present day, just how profound a shift in western spiritual thought the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century represented. We can more easily understand its immense political implications (including the Thirty Years War in Europe, or ultimately the English Civil War a century later). Or its ecclesiastical implications (chief among them the splintering of western Christianity into denominationalism). Or its economic implications, like the rise of the “Protestant Work Ethic” and its impacts on labor productivity in the northern latitudes in the following centuries.

But the real significance of the Protestant Reformation to the evolution of humanity lies in the spiritual and theological dimensions of the movement. At its core, the Reformation was a revolution in human thought, in self-understanding, and most importantly in theological imagination. For the first time in well over 1000 years, Christians began to conceive of the possibility that a relationship with God was possible outside the existing structures of the church -- despite centuries of excommunications, inquisitions, teachings and preachings to the contrary. It was a moment of emergence, when individual faithful people in various countries had developed enough spiritual and intellectual confidence to follow the stirrings of their consciences and took action to challenge the authority of the core institution that provided stability, structure, and support to the way of life in Western Europe.

It is important to remember at the outset that the Reformers were not a coordinated army seeking to destroy the Roman Catholic Church and walk away from God. They were not atheists or even anti-authoritarians. In fact, most of the leaders were clergy or academics. They believed in God and they believed in authority – but they were deeply convicted that the hierarchy of the church had substituted its own institutional authority in place of the authority of Christ. And they believed that the consequences were harming the souls of faithful people, who had been taught to put their trust in the church’s power rather than in God’s saving grace.

This core concern and the courage of faithful leaders like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, William Tyndale, Jan Hus, Thomas Cranmer and Richard Hooker, had myriad implications for the evolution of Christianity in the 1500s. These were not just articulated in the form of 95 theses that Martin Luther definitely wrote and may or may not have nailed to the door of the church in Wittenburg 500 years ago. They were also articulated in the development of new theological understandings and liturgical practices that became the backbone of what became known as the Reformation Churches: Lutheranism, Calvinism, and slightly later in England, Anglicanism.

Perhaps most fundamental among these “protestant” developments was the concept of justification by faith: the idea that Christians are saved because of the grace of God and our personal relationship with Jesus Christ – rather than by our performance of certain works required by the church (such as attending mass, giving alms, or making confession). The Reformers believed the medieval church had become an unwieldy apparatus corrupted by worldly influences of money and power, such that they were promising salvation to people in exchange for their deeds and money in a kind of soul-less and transactional way. The sale of indulgences, in which the church promised to somehow transfer credit for the extra good works of the saints to the spiritual account of a loved one’s soul trapped in purgatory, was just the most egregious example of the commodification of salvation. Such bargains, feared Luther especially, could never actually ensure what they promised to deliver, because salvation cannot be sacramentally assigned by Popes or priests, only be given as a free gift from God to the faithful.

From this theological starting point, the Reformers advanced a variety of particular modifications to the life and practice of Christianity. Unsurprisingly, they took a rather low view of the sacraments and the priesthood. In place of these pathways to salvation, they championed the Bible – not as we heard from Luther earlier today, as a series of rules to follow, but in its capacity to invite us into relationship with Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Of course, for this to be a real invitation, capable of the inner transformation required for a sinful person to enjoy their redemption, the Reformers demanded that the Bible become linguisticly accessibility to the people – translated into their own languages and read aloud in those languages during worship. Imagine what it would be like to worship your entire life as a Christian person without being able to hear Jesus’ own words, or to read the Bible and consult the core texts of your faith. How would you come to understand the history of God’s presence in the world? How could your worship be anything *other* than a kind of spiritual transaction: the exchange of your physical presence in church for your soul’s eternal place in heaven. How could you ever come to know and love Jesus? The short answer is, you wouldn’t.

From these two foundational reforms: justification by faith and scripture and worship in the language of the people, the Reformation fanned out across Europe. It had different flavors in different places. And in England, it was perhaps the most different. The English Reformers both were exposed and attracted to these two central ideas emerging on the Continent, but they were not at the core of what drove England’s break from Rome or the development of its own unique church. The English, perhaps being true to character, experienced a Reformation much more comfortable with authority, order and institutional power than in Germany or Geneva. They retained the idea of Bishops in their church, whose leadership and authority derived from the apostolic line of succession, dating back to the early disicples of Jesus. Even more importantly, they retained the presence and practice of sacraments, and argued fiercely back and forth to find language that would make room for a range of beliefs among the faithful about what exactly was going on with the bread and the wine. As we heard from Richard Hooker, the English Reformation’s greatest theologian, the Eucharist was more than just memorial of something absent, rather it was “means effectual whereby God…delivereth into our hands the grace available unto eternal life” (Laws, V). Luther would not have agreed. For our Reformation ancestors, and for us today, sacramental participation remains at the center of what it means to be Christian – not because performing the ritual transacts our salvation, but because the Eucharist is the gift from God to those who have already been redeemed by Christ, inviting us to experience his real presence.

There is of course, much, much more to the history and theology of the Protestant Reformation than I could ever recapitulate in a sermon, even one of appropriate Protestant length. But I want to turn in the final part of this homily to the question of what is our Reformation Legacy as Episcopalians?

For a number of reasons, Anglicans and therefore Episcopalians, are to some extent considered by some to be not quite a fully Reformed Church. And I guess it doesn’t help that we also proclaim ourselves each Sunday to be part of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. So, what legacy does this immensely important period of Christian history offer to us?

As an Episcopalian myself, I like to say that if Jesus can be both fully human and fully divine, then, on my best days, I can be both a fully reformed (lower case r) and fully catholic (lower case c) Christian. It’s a lower case C for catholic (the adjective just means universal) because our tradition has maintained a belief in the fundamental unity of the Christian church. We believe that in God’s eyes, there is only one ekklesia – one gathering of those who love and serve and follow Jesus. The Reformation did many wonderful things for the church, but it also began what, 500 years later has become a seriously bad habit in Western Christianity, of faithful people simply breaking away from each other when they can’t reach agreement or alignment on a matter of belief or practice. Episcopalians find that habit to be both relationally sad and theologically problematic. There is one catholic (universal) church. We are part of it. So are Lutherans, so are Roman Catholics, so are Pentecostals, etc. etc. We believe God wants that unity expressed on earth, and so The Episcopal Church works towards it in spirit, in practice, and in ongoing dialogues with Lutherans, Methodists, Moravians, Mar Tomans, and Roman Catholics, among others.

And alongside this valuing of our catholicity, we also value our reformed heritage. I use a lower case R, because to be fair to the Lutherans and Calvinists, we never went as far as they did in moving away from the historic sources of authority of the church. We do not follow the Protestant battle cry of “sola scriptura!”. Scripture yes, but also Bishops, sacraments and the historic creeds give foundation to our church. But that said, we do take seriously as Episcopalians, the need for constant reform of the church. We stand keenly aware that any organization that is made up of people, even a holy one, will be subject to error, corruption, worldliness, and self-importance. And so we have structured our church in a way that shares authority among bishops, priests, deacons and lay people. That builds up each individual’s moral and ethical conscience, rather than simply teaching expectations and requiring conformity. And that expects to evolve, and embrace both theological, liturgical, and sociological change in every age.

On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we believe that God continues to offer the church invitations to be constantly evolving into a truer beacon of light and faith for all people. We are a reformed church because we see this ongoing process as a gift, not a threat. And we are a catholic church because we hope that when the Reformation turns 1000, that process will have led all Christians back towards each other to continue our walk with Jesus united as one. Amen.