

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

October 30, 2016

Reformation Sunday

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

James 2:14-26

Today begins a year of celebration for many churches around the globe, because 500 years ago, Oct. 31, 1517 was the date we mark as the beginning of the Protestant Churches.

Martin Luther - a monk in the RC church was convinced that his church was getting it wrong - in both what they were teaching, and the way they were teaching it. He didn't mean or want to start a new church; rather he wanted his beloved church to change...to share his discoveries about what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to be the church.

So he posted in his facebook news feed - and he had hundreds maybe thousands of friends - he shared a status update which included 95 points: Concerns he had about his church. And once it was out there, there was no going back, the movement had begun.

As he studied and wrote in the decades to follow he would change the course of history for Christians all over the world. He had a lot to say about a lot of things, but there are some major ideas which characterize the Reformation which took place 500 years ago.

And a couple of things that were of importance to Brother Martin are actually the same things that we identified were important to our church, a year ago when we wanted to state simply what the priorities of our church ought to be!

We print it on the front of the bulletin: *Sharing Christ - Changing Lives:*

Creating a Christian Foundation for Families

Learning more about Jesus

Living our Faith Beyond our Walls

Luther believed that the family is the first church we belong to - a little church of its own. In fact in 1529 he wrote a little book for families to use together - for parents to talk with their young children about the faith! The *Small Catechism* is a book of simple questions and answers - so that parents had something practical and at hand so they could teach the next generation the basics of the faith. (It's made up of 6 sections: Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Confession and Communion).

Two hundred years later here in New England, Jonathan Edwards also said that every Christian family ought to be a little church, consecrated to Christ and wholly influenced by his rules.

A Christian family is as it were a little church and commonwealth by itself, and the head of the family has more advantage in his little community to promote religion than ministers have in congregations. (Edwards)

As the primary Christian educator of your child (or grandchildren maybe), you have more influence on their faith than their Sunday School teachers or than I do.

If their faith is important to you, then making a practice of a few simple habits can have a significant impact.

Praying - meals / bedtime

Music - listen to Christian music (especially Christmas music)

Talk - start by talking about something you discovered in worship or go over the sheets the kids take home from Sunday School.

Which brings us to the next thing we have in common with Luther: Learning more about Jesus.

In Europe, when Luther lived, the “church” was the Roman Catholic Church under the leadership of Pope Leo X. The nature of the church then was very different from today. 16th century Catholic leaders knew that encouraging individual believers to read the Bible for themselves, in their own language, would undermine the authority of their hierarchy. So worship services (masses) were held in Latin (a language for the educated), and the common people had no access to the Bible, since it hadn’t yet been translated into any other languages.

Luther believed that everyone should be able to read the Bible, and so he translated it into German. The revolution here is not so much that he did this, but that at the same time the printing press (invented in 1440) was coming into popular usage. And its use was in full swing by the time Luther’s Bible was translated.

He also believed that people should not read the Bible alone - because it needs discussing, interpreting. It is a weird set of books! And to read any ancient document without help is a challenge...let alone the WORD OF GOD!

Believing that God is still speaking through these words, means we need help to understand both what it meant back then, and what it means NOW!

And the Bible is how we learn about Jesus who is the center of our life together and our individual lives of faith.

In his book, *Six Hours One Friday*, (pg. 15, Multnomah Books, 1989) Max Lucado tells the story of how he and his boat survived a hurricane. An old sea man gave Max the advice to take his boat to deep water, drop four anchors off each corner of the boat, and pray that the anchors held. Max survived that storm, but he says that he learned an important lesson, all of us need an anchor that will hold during the storms of life.

That anchor is Jesus. Because Jesus shows us what the unconditional love of God looks like in the flesh. Jesus shows us that there is always hope, even on the darkest days. Jesus offers us forgiveness for the worst mistakes we’ve ever made.

And, if we’re honest, we all need more of that. Sure we clean up real well for church on Sundays, but the truth is we all carry worries and fears that keep us from living the life God wants for us.

We need to learn more about Jesus - because we need more Jesus.

But all of this - strengthening Christian families, learning about Jesus - is not for our own sake and edification. And so we need the book of James, which we read earlier.

Here’s an interesting thing - when they were deciding what was going to go in the Bible (between the 2nd to the 4th centuries) the book of James almost didn’t make the cut! It rarely mentions Jesus.

In fact Luther really didn’t like it! Because his “aha” of faith had to do with discovering that God’s love was poured out for him (and everyone) NO MATTER WHAT, the language of “working our faith” made him uncomfortable. He called the book of straw.

But it did make it into the Bible! And good thing, because it keeps us from staying focused on ourselves, or preoccupied with getting our thoughts right to please God at the expense of living the life God made us for.

Living our Faith Beyond our Walls is what keeps us from becoming a club of people who gather every week for weird rituals with insider language, and sometimes old fashioned ways of doing things.

Our traditions, language and worship ARE important as they continually point us beyond ourselves to Christ and to others, and don't become a hindrance to our generosity, as individuals and as a church. The church exists for those who are not in it.

Sharing Christ - Changing Lives:

- Creating a Christian foundation for families
- Learning more about Jesus
- Living our faith beyond our walls.

Amen!