

Reformation Sunday
Text: John 8:31-36
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
October 26, 2008

“Continuous Reformation”

Ah the Good Old Days! I remember hearing my parents say that when I was a kid. I think I may have even said that every now and then. Ah - the Good Old Days! But were the good old days really that good? Let's turn the clocks back a century and peek into the American lifestyle around 19-0-8. One home in 7 had a bath tub. One home in 13 had a telephone. Infant mortality was 140 per 1,000 babies compared to 6.3 per 1,000 today. Life expectancy was a youthful 47 years old. 6% of adults had High School diplomas. Colleges graduated 1.5% of the students they do today. The average workweek was 52 hours, (Some things never change). And only 8,000 automobiles were registered, in the entire Country! Ah yes, the Good Old Days may not have been that good.

But let's be realistic. That was a hundred years ago. Fifty years ago - now those were the Good Old Days. In 1958, a refrigerator and transistor radio were 'hi tech' devices. Cancers of many kinds that are stoppable and curable today, were common killers. An "Indy" car could win the race at 120 mph. A house could be bought, with lot and utilities, for under \$20,000. A new car could be bought for under \$2,000. Being a 'millionaire' was a phenomenon.

I recall the time pretty well, and it was pleasant. I was only 6 years old, going to Willard Elementary School. Alaska and Hawaii were new states. I still remember where and when I saw the new flag with 50 Stars on it. It was at the Franklin Playground around the corner from my house in Kensington. 'I like Ike' Eisenhower was president and we seemed to be comfortable, even though teachers told us to get under our desks occasionally, or go to the basement, or go outside, for various drills of 'emergency' needs. Ah yes, the GOOD Old Days! When we look back we'd have to admit that the Good Old Days probably weren't all that good after all.

There had been a Reformation from 1908 to 1958. And there was a Continuous Reformation from 1958 - 2008. Many homes have not only more than one bathtub, they have several entire Bathrooms. Telephones? There's almost one in every pocket! 8,000 cars in the entire Country. It's more like 8 million now. Okay, maybe everything isn't better. But Reformations - Re-FORMING - usually makes things better. That's what we are commemorating today.

The Reformation of the Christian Church on October 31st 1517 - when Martin Luther began this whole Re-Forming thing by listing 95 items of concern that he wanted to have debated by the Academic Community at Wittenburg University in Germany. Back then, like today, people resisted change. The Pope didn't like the things Luther was saying about not

being able to buy your way into heaven. Luther was saying that you don't have to pay a priest to pray for your departed loved one, because once they are in heaven they are in God's care and no longer need our prayers. Luther thought that the people should be able to read the Holy Scriptures for themselves. But all the Bibles were either in the original Greek and Hebrew or in Latin Translations. So Luther Translated the New Testament into German and now people could read for themselves, about God's free Grace and forgiveness. Martin Luther never wanted to leave the Roman Catholic Church. He just wanted to Re-form it into a Church that would be more in keeping with God's purpose. But Luther's teachings would end the sale of Indulgences and the threat of Hell if people started to discover for themselves that God loves them and Jesus already paid any price necessary for their Eternal Salvation. Ah yes - the Good Old Days!

I'll bet your Indulgences that Martin Luther would say that today is better than the good old days. Because the Reformation didn't start and end on October 31st 1517, it is a continuous Reformation. Yes, there have been struggles and turmoil, but there has also been blessings and progress. But one thing that took Luther a long time to learn, that is still a lesson to be learned today, is that line from the 3rd Chapter of Romans that says: There is No Distinction, since we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is Jesus Christ.

Imagine that you're out jogging one day with Mike, a world record holder in the long jump at twenty-nine feet, four inches. While you're running along, you hear a low rumble, and your feet sense a steadily increasing tremor that alerts you to the start of an earthquake like no other earthquake you've experienced. Suddenly, a mere stride ahead of you and Mike, the earth splits open. You both come to a full stop to discover that you are isolated on a small sliver of earth, separated from safety by a deep crevasse that is about thirty feet across. The little patch of earth you're standing on is crumbling in the continuing upheaval, and you see that it's a matter of moments before you both are cast into the crevasse where you'll be crushed by the lurching earth. Things look hopeless. Your only hope is to jump across the canyon.

Mike judges that the jump is about eight inches longer than his record-setting long jump, but he decides to try it anyway. He gets back as far as he can so that he can gather as much speed as possible. He crouches into a three-point stance, and you yell, "On your mark! Get set! GO!" Mike runs as fast as he can. Right on the edge of the crevasse, he kicks off and launches himself into the air. It's a perfect jump. Sailing over the crevasse, he lands with the toes of both feet barely on the edge of the other side. His jump is an amazing twenty-nine feet, six inches—two inches farther than his world record! Unfortunately, the jump isn't far enough. His feet slip off the edge, and for a moment he scrambles to grab the edge with his hands. It's no good, though. As you watch he falls into the crevasse and dies. Poor Mike.

The earthquake continues and the small patch of earth you are standing on is becoming even smaller. So now it's your turn. You crouch into a three-point stance as far from the take-

off edge as possible. Mentally giving yourself the signal, you spring forward. Huffing and puffing, you pound up to the edge, kick off, and jump—straight down into the crevasse. You're dead too. It didn't matter that Mike nearly got to the other side with a perfect, world-record long jump. It simply wasn't far enough. Judged by its final outcome, Mike's jump was no better than yours. Both of you died.

Getting to the heaven side of eternal life works much the same way. I can understand why the Pope and the priests of Luther's day didn't want to say this, and I'm a bit hesitant myself - but it doesn't matter how good you live, how many church services you attend, or how much better you are than other people. You can't save yourself. The best people in the world can't save themselves, "for *all* have sinned and fall short" (Romans 3:23). No one is good enough on his or her own. That's why Jesus came. He's the only one who ever lived a perfect life. When we put our faith and trust in him and make him Lord of our lives, his perfection becomes ours. He's the only one who can get us safely to the other side.

That's what we received at our Baptism as his Baptismal Gift - Jumping Shoes. In this free gift given to us from God, through Jesus Christ, we are able to jump over that Chasm of sin that threatens to separate us from God. Now if we can only close up those gaps that separate us from each other.

This has not been my favorite week of being a pastor. Ah the Good Old Days. The time before computers and all the problems they cause, both in the office and on Organ Consoles. A time before Building programs and faulty alarm systems, inferior concrete pads, poorly designed heating systems, and bathroom problems I won't mention in public. A time Before an Economic Crisis that makes me wonder how we're going to continue ministry with declining offerings. Ah the Good Old Days when people could just do something for their Church just because they wanted to be nice and not ruffle anyone's feathers.

This week has had a lot of problems and it hasn't been fun being a Pastor. I even found myself thinking, "Is 12 years the limit to being an effective pastor in a congregation?" Oh, don't worry, I probably have this thought about once a month. But then I started to look at the other things that happened just within this past week. I went to visit Vi Gibson who left the hospital to go to the Personal Care Facility at Spring House Estates. She has a Bowel Obstruction and does not want the surgery. Her life will be coming to an end. We prayed for God's guidance and were giving thanks for a long and fruitful life. In accepting Vi's decision, a Reformation took place. I visited Frey Blum in the hospital as she told me the good news that the biopsy showed she did not have Cancer! We held hands and gave a prayer of Thanksgiving to God. A Reformation was taking place. Our Bible Study this week was based around the Sacrament of Holy Communion. I needed to hear again of how I am nourished through this sacrament as a Child of God. It helps me keep things in perspective, and a Reformation was taking place. Then we hosted a synodical meeting here at St. Peter's for the Lutheran Congregations of the Lower Montgomery Conference. As I heard person after person say what a nice facility we

have; how great the desserts were; and people who were unable to climb stairs just walked over and pushed the button on the elevator; people who were burdened with boxes simply pushed the plate on the post and the door opened for them. I remind myself that our building program was necessary, and a Reformation is taking place. Then I received a phone call from Georgia Snell to let me know that Byron was admitted to the hospital. While not being happy with the news that his brain tumor is growing faster than expected and that his life would soon be over, we shared Holy Communion together at his bedside and prayed that God will lead him through the valley of the shadow of death. Because we know a Reformation will take place. And yesterday I had the joy of performing the Wedding Ceremony for Jenna Huber and Doug Cowperthwaite. It is always an honor when I have the privilege of witnessing two people share their vows of love for each other and begin their married life together. And a Reformation continues to take place.

So in retrospect - this wasn't a bad week after all. A lot of ministry was done. St. Peter's Lutheran Church has been here for 256 years. Those Good Old Days that began back in 1752, are what makes us who we are today. And the ministry we provide today, will be the Good Old Days of Tomorrow. But the Reformation needs to continue.

We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But it is through sinners like us - that God works! Amen!