

Was a lovely fall day in Western Washington -- and hearty good singing in church!
Blessings on your week,
Beth

Reformation Day. October 29, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church,
Sequim, WA. Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36.
“Always Reforming”

John 8

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ 33They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?’ 34 Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. 36So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

On Halloween: phantoms, skeletons, and other monsters haunt our streets and homes. After it’s all over, the goblins will take off their frightening costumes and throw them into a corner.

On October 31, in Germany, in 1517, 500 years ago, on a holiday borrowed from pagan tradition, folks visited the cemetery next to the church with picnics of treats, pretzels and beer. There was probably talk of ghosts and skeletons, of grandparents and great-grandparents, and of the All Saints’ Mass the next day in church.

In Wittenberg, a family at the weekly market picked up groceries, watched the clowns and musicians, and chatted with friends. They stopped to listen to a priest selling certificates to assure recently deceased people forgiveness of sins. Mom had hoped to save back a bit of money to put away for Christmas, but fear and piety won out and they bought the paper indulgence for grandpa instead.

Later that day, a young priest hammered a list of 95 debating points or theses onto the most prominent bulletin board in the town: the door of the Castle Church, just down the street from the market. He wanted the church to stop selling those certificates of forgiveness. His name was Martin Luther: hero, saint and villain.

He had learned from studying the Bible that God started out loving us, would continue to love us, and would forgive our sins out of love. We didn’t need to buy

pieces of paper from the church. The last verse of today's lesson from Romans was key:

“For we hold that a person is justified – made right with God – by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

Luther cherished Jesus' promise that the truth about God's love would make him free – free from worry, guilt, and his own self-inflicted punishments. Luther wanted to reform his church, to free it from the practice of selling indulgences. They were hurting the souls of the people whom he, as pastor, was pledged to care for. This put him on a collision course with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope.

The Pope banned Luther's writings and made him an outlaw by excommunicating him from the church. Many churches in Germany and Northern Europe then became known as protesting – Protestant – or Lutheran churches, although Luther was very unhappy with that! He wanted to reform the old church, not start a new one, and certainly not one named after him. Each side cursed the other; it was a shameful mess of sharp tongues and harsh writings on both “sides.” The ghosts and monsters of this piece of history haunt us to this day, although both sides have retracted the curses of their medieval past, including hateful things said against Jewish people. Together with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, our wider Lutheran church has worked hard to move toward unity and peace. We have deepened mutual understanding and collaborated for the common good.

Jesus desired unity among his followers. Most Protestant churches and some Lutheran congregations have stopped celebrating Reformation Day as we do today. They lament the tragic schism. They do not drape their church in red to recall the blood that flowed when reformers were killed. I hope the red colors remind us of the flame of the Holy Spirit seeking ongoing reform today.

Marking the festival of Reformation does us no good unless we commit to ongoing reform of ourselves and of our churches. *Semper reformanda* – always reforming!

Luther's church reforms included changing the language of worship from Latin to German, giving both bread and wine at Communion, translating the Bible into the language of the people, allowing pastors to marry, and introducing popular music for congregational singing.

The church of my childhood has reformed as well. In my youth, there were no girl acolytes, no woman pastors, no children at the Communion rail. No piano, only

organ. Women wore hats and skirts to church and did not vote in congregational meetings. For those of you who are young enough not to remember these things, the reforms may seem small. But you elders who lived through them know how difficult the changes were.

I do not know what reforms or changes might be needed here at Dungeness Valley. I do know that visitors come and go and we don't get to know some of them. Do we need changes in our worship style? Do we need a Saturday night service, a mid-week service, fellowship gatherings in public places? I do know that our community cries out for help for the poor, the homeless, those who feel lost . . . and who may not "look or think like we do."

The freedom Jesus speaks of is freedom to reform and to reach out in love to others.

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A little girl once overheard her parents talking after they thought she was asleep. "It's too bad our daughter isn't pretty," said mom. "I hope she will find a husband in spite of her looks," said dad. The child went to bed and wept. She carried her parents' verdict with her for over two decades. She dedicated her life to teaching. When she was 30, a young man met her and, seeing great beauty in her, convinced her to marry him. Finally she knew the truth: she was beautiful. And this truth freed her from the wrongful belief she had held for so long.

You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.

The ghosts and goblins that concern us today are the verdicts spoken over our lives and into our hearts years ago by others or this morning by ourselves. They are the things in our past which shout at us that we are not good enough or that we are not lovable.

You know the ghosts of your past. An alcoholic parent, a bout of drug abuse or alcoholism yourself, unfaithfulness to a spouse, hatred or gossip, the overwhelming desire to have something as good or better than someone else.

Jesus came to free us from these ghosts and goblins. The trick-or-treaters forget their scary costumes in their eagerness to feast on candy. Jesus invites us to look at those costumes, those signs of what haunts us, and to take them off. Throw them into the corner. Forget them. You are beautiful in God's eyes. God claimed you from the beginning of your life and repeated that claim when you were baptized. You are free from the guilt, the blame and the shame. In their place Jesus has prepared a feast for us – not candy, but the feast of his very self: his body and

blood in Holy Communion. Eat, drink, and go forth to live like the beautiful child of God that you are: dressed in the clothes of Jesus' holiness – loving and serving your neighbor.

On Reformation Day, we remember with thanksgiving Luther's scholarship, faith and courage. And we grieve the disunity among Christian churches. We will sing Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God." Garrison Keillor tells of a man who came back from a religious retreat talking of his spiritual journey. Now, said Garrison, Lutherans don't talk about journeys. They have a mighty fortress and once they're inside it, they never leave. □

Well, we DO have a fortress, a God who provides refuge and strength and truth in our every trial and need. But we are indeed also on a journey of Reformation that only the Holy Spirit can lead.

We can sing "A Mighty Fortress" down to the last verse where we proclaim that even if we lose everything, strength, health, or family, "the kingdom's ours forever." No longer are we haunted by ghosts of guilt or brokenness. We are freed for the reforming journey, freed by Jesus to play as children in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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You may wish to join ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton on Tuesday, Oct. 31, as she co-hosts a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The event, which will include speakers and a service, will be at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

The event, which will meet under the theme "Looking Back and Called Forward," will be available online via livestream at www.elca.org.

Event Date: Tue, October 31, 2017

Event Time: 10:00 am - 6:00 pm (Eastern Time, most likely)

Location: Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Washington, D.C.

Affiliation: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America