

# **Always Reforming, Always Striving, Always Looking**

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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## Reformation Sunday

There is an old saying that Christianity makes a better verb than noun. It is less a thing to possess than it is a series of actions we take in order to live in ways consistent with the teachings of our faith. Or as Anne Lamott describes herself, "In the same way that my friend is Jewish, I like to think of myself as Christian-ish." What she means by that is that her faith is always being practiced, always in process and is never complete.

Today we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Actually, October 31, 1517, is the anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. That act of protest, against the church's selling of indulgences and questioning papal authority in matters of salvation, set in motion not only the reform of the church, but its division and subsequent divisions as well.

That was never Luther's intent. Rather he sought to bring the church more in line with teachings set forth in scripture. But the Reformation also set into motion monumental, cultural revolutions, in terms of authority, education, the ordering of family life, work and commerce.

There are celebrations taking place around the world this weekend, marking this historic anniversary. As a pivotal movement in history, the Reformation has been studied and analyzed, and particularly in terms of its relevancy today. Its rise, at the same time as the development of the printing press, established individual responsibility as one of the chief marks of the movement, allowing individuals to interpret scripture for themselves by placing Bibles into the hands of ordinary people.

And within the analysis of the Reformation, most historians link that movement to many modern day advances. Others, however, blame and lay at its feet our troubling current state of affairs. With scripture then still largely seen as the central authority in people's lives, consider, for a moment, how individual interpretations of that scripture led to a break from what had been a centralized authority, with various factions now claiming their own versions of truth. Naturally and sadly, theological division grew and widened as a result, and we feel those effects today.

In the aftermath of the Reformation, clergy were allowed to marry and divorce became legalized, recognizing the growing reality that people were splitting up. But by legalizing divorce, it was removed from the church's domain as a sacrament, thus creating a distinction between the moral law of God and the law of the land. Given divorce rates today, you can decide for yourself if that was for better or for worse.

Fast forwarding nearly 450 years, and remember that in the fight for civil rights in this country, were people of faith using the same Bible to support their positions of either civil rights or segregation. That hasn't gotten any better.

And when our own John Calvin, a lawyer, found a way to reform the issue of usury—lending money and charging interest, something prohibited in the Hebrew Scriptures, it created an economic juggernaut that some attribute to modern-day capitalism. Capitalism already existed at the time, but to people who had been used to living under the authority of the church, the Reformation sanctified commerce and economic expansion as essential to the improvement of individual lives and to societies as a whole. And yet others make the claim today that an unrestrained capitalism has led to greed and rampant consumerism that is crippling us today—things that stand in direct opposition to the teachings of Jesus who was always on the side of the poor.

500 years later, it is fair and right to study the Reformation and its lasting impact on the world. And while it may be the case that there exist today varying individual interpretations of truth, deep theological disagreements and divisions over what the Bible says and teaches, as well as economic corruption because the system has been rigged in favor of those who can hire powerful lawyers and lobbyists to advance

their agendas, I also know that if the Reformation is responsible for anything at all it is responsible for lifting up and advancing education, establishing colleges and universities and insisting on an educated clergy. Go ahead and arrive at your understanding of truth, but not without facts, not without rigorous study, and not without having done your homework. The Reformation was about advancing the life of the mind, not keeping it closed.

In today's text from Deuteronomy, Moses had been leading the Israelites for 40 years. He led them out of slavery in Egypt, to Mt. Sinai, through many trials until at last, they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land. And yet for all of that, and after coming so close, Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. Instead, and it's a poignant scene, God takes Moses up to the mountaintop and shows him as far as his eyes can see, the land God has promised to his ancestors. And God says, "I will let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Moses would indeed die and be buried without actually entering the Promised Land. And it seems unfair. It seems cruel, on God's part. And scholars have long debated the possible reasons God might have had for not permitting Moses to enter after coming so close. I've never been drawn into those kinds of debates. In addition to never really knowing the reason, it changes the story dramatically if Moses were to enter the Promised Land instead of the Israelites being led into the Promised Land by someone else.

Besides, maybe this piece of the narrative at the end of Moses' life, in fact maybe the whole thing isn't about arriving at a final destination at all? Maybe it is all about the journey itself. It's about never feeling settled or content, or feeling like we have arrived even when residing in the Promised Land. It's about how the life of faith, life lived in relationship with this God, is never finished business. It is always on the move, always reforming.

God has called us into a covenantal relationship and raised up leaders to help the people of God reach the Promised Land. And Jesus showed us the way, calling it the Kingdom of God—a realm in which we are still awaiting its full arrival. In more recent times, Martin Luther King Jr.

would call it the Beloved Community. And in a way, those places and locations, Promised Land, Kingdom of God, Beloved Community, are never meant as final destinations, but are rather used to locate the destinations of our deepest longings and aspirations as humans.

And for Dr. King, like Moses, his too would be a dream deferred. We can each recall the image we've seen of him dozens of times, and hear his voice as he gave that haunting speech the night before his assassination. It was April in the tumultuous year of 1968, and King had gone to Memphis to lead a protest on behalf of the sanitation workers who were not being paid fairly.

And he was aware of the hostility and threats that were raging against him. His daughter reminded those of us who heard her speak at the Ujamaa Breakfast recently, that at the time of his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most hated man in America. While realistic about the dangers and the threats facing him—about the long, difficult road ahead, he lifted up the successes and continued growth of the movement as it was beginning to spread. But that night he said,

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land! So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Dr. King would be gunned down within hours of that speech while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. But the movement he was so instrumental in starting, shaping and leading, would march on. It would grow and evolve, raising up new leaders and gathering new followers—helping reform hearts and minds and even a nation.

After Moses died, Joshua stood in his place. And while Joshua may have been ordained by Moses, he was not Moses. And the demands and challenges Joshua would face would be no less than were the demands and challenges faced by Moses. Like his predecessor, Joshua would need to be bold and faithful in his leadership, and the people he would lead needed to be bold and faithful as well.

The people needed to move forward. There was no time for looking back, no nostalgia—no longing for how good we had it when we were slaves back in Egypt. The Promised Land was before them, the way it is always before us, and they needed to press on and journey toward it together.

We are a church Reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God. And now, and in the days and months ahead, this congregation will continue to live into this ancient and always reforming tradition, taking you down new paths and leading you to places you have yet to imagine.

As one commentary I looked at on this text put it,

There are enormous lessons of leadership in these verses, lessons for leaders incoming and outgoing, as well as lessons for those who are led. But more to the point, there are timeless lessons about the grace and mercy of God (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, p. 537.)

People of God, in good times and in bad, in times of confidence as well as great uncertainty, as people of faith, we are always reforming, always striving, always looking for the ways to follow, that will lead us closer to that better day, that brighter hope, that land of promise.

Amen.