

Reformation Sunday Sermon for October 25, 2026
Loosely based on John 8:31-36
For those preaching in the Western ND Synod
Provided by Pastor Mike Pretzer, Assistant to the Bishop

The last couple of weeks I've had a feeling of familiarity; nostalgia even. The season of fall feels familiar to me. The October sky looks familiar to the October skies of the past. The cooler air and the heavier jacket remind me of the routines and practices that come with this time of year. The change in temperatures and the possibility of snow, have thrust my mind back to the past when I was a kid. These external elements have triggered many internal memories. Suddenly I'm sitting in my dad's Ford pickup eating a summer sausage sandwich on a white bun that my mom put together with too much margarine. It's hunting season and I'm cold. I thought I dressed warm enough but I didn't. Everything around me is a shade of brown with a dusting of white. The cattails, once thick and green and waving in the summer wind, are now stiff and brown, bent down and unable to move.

There are boiled eggs with salt and pepper in the cooler, a can of pop and little Snickers bars that were supposed to be for Halloween trick-or-treat-ers. And then there is that feeling of comfort when we return home at the end of daylight. It's warm in the house. It smells good. Mom is waiting with her apron on to hear about the day. The light outside is fading while the yellow glow of the lights in the house make me think that I've stepped into a Thomas Kinkade painting.

At this time of year, a platter of popcorn balls would arrive from my grandmother's house. She made them every year for Halloween. They stuck together with a caramel mixture of cream and butter, sugar and white syrup. Thank God I have her recipe today!

Maybe I'm more reflective at this time of year because my Mom died in the fall. It was October 7th, 2000. October, with its sky and falling leaves and box elder bugs, always takes me back to that deep sadness when she died prematurely from pancreatic cancer. The month of October calls me to remember these unique memories of the past.

For Lutherans, this is also a familiar time of year. October reminds us of the brewing

changes of the Reformation set in motion by Martin Luther. On October 31st, 1517 we remember that Martin Luther nailed his 95 thesis to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Today we remember and celebrate how Martin Luther and others sparked the Reformation that brought forth great change and a better understanding of the faith for common believers.

It's familiar to us to sing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, a hymn that Martin Luther himself wrote based on Psalm 46. It's familiar to put out the red altar cloths, a color that reminds us of the spirit's working through Luther and the reformation movement. It's familiar to proclaim again, that by faith you have been justified through grace!

After 509 years we still celebrate Martin Luther and the nailing of the 95 thesis to the door of the castle church in Germany. This document stated areas of reform that Martin Luther believed must take place in the church to better reflect the love and grace of God. He was hoping this document nailed in public would be a discussion starter about where the church had strayed from the word of God.

But because of some unique circumstances and the time in history, his demand for reform divided the church, from the large Catholic Church into Protesting groups that eventually became the denominations that we know of today.

Luther had no idea the direction his actions would eventually take. So it makes me think, what would it be like if Martin Luther himself pulled up to the church today to inspect it! I think he would be pleased to know that we still preach justification by grace through faith, that it is not our doing that earns God's favor, but rather that it is God's doing through Christ that saves us from our sin and death.

I also think that he would be pleased that his written materials are still being used today in the church. We still use his Small Catechism to teach about the faith. We still use the Augsburg Confession as the primary guide for our church constitution and teachings in seminary. He would be pleased at the number of languages that you can find the Bible translated into. After all, he was the first one to translate the Bible into German so that the common folk could read it. He would be pleased that we still preach the word of God from our

pulpits, that we baptize babies, and that we have communion as often as we do. He would be pleased that men and women are equally able to proclaim the word of God and do ministry in Christ's name. And I think he would be pleased that we don't take ourselves too seriously all of the time.

Of course it's impossible for me to put words in this extraordinary man's mouth. It is difficult to really know what he would think about the church if he were to show up here this morning. I'm sure he would have plenty to critique!

It's easy to reflect back on this time, the start of the reformation, with nostalgia. Great things did come from it. We have inherited much needed change in the church due to the life-risking work of Martin Luther and many others in the faith.

But part of the story is that the work of the reformation over 500 years ago caused chaos and sparks that ignited an uncontrollable fire of change. Unfortunately the first part of the 16th Century was a disruptive, bloody, and a violent time. When Martin Luther lifted up from scripture, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast," (Ephesians 2:8-9), sparks were flying everywhere. He turned the church upside down. The reformation in the church rocked the world.

Because this was such a tremendous message contrary to the world view, this time of change was ruled by chaos. These sparks spurred the 30 years war. In some places, total chaos broke out. God's kingdom has a way of turning things upside down. And when the certainty of "the way it used to be" is gone, it may seem like all hell is breaking loose. Like a fork in the microwave, sparks started flying when the Holy Spirit was breaking through and ushering in change.

There are times in history, like the reformation and perhaps you could argue our current time, when we go from order, to disorder, to reorder. Or maybe we could say: we go

from broken order, to reformation, to a new order. Or, how about, we go from familiar, to change, to a new normal.

We know we are in a time of change right now. Chaos and discord is all around us. We want to be settled into the reordered phase, the new order or the new normal, but we are not there yet. There is still a lot of "reformation" that needs to take place before we can get there. The church can still be reformed – it's an ongoing process. Policing needs to be reformed. Systemic racism in our country needs reformation. Immigration policy needs to be reformed. Perhaps our perceptions and tolerances and privileged statuses need to be reformed. This time of year reminds us to take a stand against that which is broken and to do the hard work to make it better.

Brian McLaren says, *"As we experience discomfort in this time, let's begin to dream of a new normal, a new normal that addresses the weaknesses and problems that were going unaddressed in the old normal. If we're wise, we won't go back; we'll go forward."*

Martin Luther knew the power and the importance of reform. He stood his ground. He stood on his principles. He stood on the Word of God. With courage and without fear of the consequences he implemented his convictions. It caused chaos and mayhem in his time, there is no doubt, but we have benefited from his and others sacrifices today.

The gospel, the good news in scripture today, is that you are free. Luther would say that because of Christ's death on the cross, you are now free from God's judgment and your own sin and death. He would also say, now you are free to love and serve your neighbor. Why the oppressive rules? Why the cruelty? Why the hatred? Why the violence? Why? That is not who we are called to be! You are free in Christ to love and serve your neighbor.

Well, perhaps this time of year is also a reflective time for you. Thank you for letting me share some of my reflections and memories with you from my childhood and past. Please take with you today that God holds your past, your present and your future in the palm of

God's hand. And when you experience the chaos and disorder of reformation change, God will usher you into a better future or reorder, a new normal. The hard work that we do now will make for a better place for those who will come after us. Amen.