



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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REFORMATION SUNDAY

A Knock on the Door Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 4:1-6

It was a dream, born long ago in the emptiness of time and space, a dream seeded in the heart of the holy. It was a dream planted in a fertile corner of the universe and tended by none other than God as the living, growing, evolving creation known as humanity grew up into the image of God.

The dream was not humanity itself, but how we humans would relate to one another. It was a dream in which love, loyalty, mutual need, and respect were wedded to daily life. From the beginning, however, the dream was threatened when mistrust and dishonesty infected God's creation as we know from the first pages of scripture. No sooner had the door closed on the idyllic garden than heartache and cruelty entered the story when jealousy and violence between brothers introduced death and isolation. Over time, optimism grew as the number of people increased and they came together for a common cause, but the building of a tower to heaven in order to become like God was more of a nightmare than a dream and God had no choice but to scatter his people throughout the earth. The dream faded and appeared to be little more than a poignant memory.

Divine hope was lifted once more when a man and a woman from a tiny speck of a crossroads called Haran caught God's attention. Abraham and Sarah were invited into an exciting venture intended to raise up a people who would spread throughout the world to tell others about God and claim their brothers and sisters. Sadly, once again hope faded when the Hebrew family misunderstood the dream and claimed it for themselves. Tensions grew, enmities formed, clashes resulted, desperation ensued, and oppression, slavery, rebellion, and finally freedom became the story of the people. The dream, however, appeared fragmented and forgotten.

Then God took the boldest step yet and laced on the sandals of humanity and walked the still fertile fields of the earth as he once had in the garden. Known as Jesus, "One Who Saves," the Divine resurrected the dream, mended the fragments, and offered it back to the earth. Some people welcomed it, but, once again, the noxious weeds of distrust, dishonesty, jealousy, hatred, and violence threatened the dream.

Thankfully, love and truth and goodness do not die easily. Jesus rose to life to tell us so and to invite us again to make the dream a reality. The dream was repeated. Love was shared. Truth was proclaimed. The Gospel spread like a vine.

Unfortunately, neither do fear and a desire for control die easily. As the Body of Christ on earth became the Church, old parasites returned choking the Gospel with unnecessary rules, selfish limitations, and false hopes.

The Christian Church, Christ's Body on earth, began to seek, not unity, but uniformity. Control instead of freedom was the order of the day. Conformity rather than comfort was the message to the masses. The dream was stifled and threatened again.

As often happens in the story of God and his children, an unwitting character played a critical role in resurrecting the dream once more. When Martin Luther, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church, it was in reality a knock on the door of the Church Universal to open up, air out, refresh, and reform. It was an invitation to dream with God one more time.

God's dream was as crisp and clear as ever. With certain parameters that guarantee continuity. God spoke the world into being with fantastical diversity and uniqueness and created humanity with no less creativity. We are gloriously different and amazingly unique. The dream is that God's greatest creation would be unified, not by how we look or speak or act or even think. The children of God would be united by what is true and right and good. As the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Ephesus,

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Luther did not intend the Reformation. He simply wanted to have a conversation about some things he believed were wrong in the way the Gospel was being proclaimed by the Church. He was not out to destroy the Roman Catholic Church. After all, the Church had nurtured and cared for

him, offered safe haven and the opportunity to discover the grace of God. He did, however, want to see some things changed. He did want the church to re-form in much the same way his own life had been changed and re-ordered by the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Not surprising, those old hangers-on of fear and control and jealousy and hatred began to stir again, but Luther would not cower. He had been saved by grace and God infused him with confidence and resolve to stand up to the mightiest powers on earth at the time. He suffered to be certain. He was forced out of his beloved church. His reputation with some people was forever marred. His health and his family suffered. Luther, however, had seen God's dream for himself and wanted the rest of us to see it as well. All of God's people living in harmony with one another, recognizing their Creator as the source of all things good, was a dream that will never die.

The anguish and suffering that resulted from the Reformation were not good. The divides that erupted between people of faith were not desired by God. The call to think carefully about who God is and how God acts in the world was divinely inspired, however. And the opening up of the Church to the world was indeed the dream of God.

We know how vastly different people are throughout the world. We know how culture and traditions vary throughout the regions of our country. In fact, significant differences are obvious from state to state, from county to county, even from family to family. Our world is a gloriously diverse place! Think of the multiplicity of forms the Christian Church has taken on over the past five hundred years. We have learned that instead of taking our particular understanding of the Gospel to someone who lives in a very different culture, we help them to discover the voice of the Gospel within their day to day life. Today the Christian Church is diverse in every way except for our one source of unity: the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord!

A year ago, in the Lutheran Cathedral of Lund, Sweden, the commemoration of the beginning of the Reformation was held. One of the preachers was none other than Pope Francis. Signaling the reality that there should be no divisions among the people who bear the name of Christ, Pope Francis said:

Here in Lund, at this prayer service, we wish to manifest our shared desire to remain one with Christ, so that we may have life. We ask him, "Lord, help us by your grace to be more closely

united to you and thus, together, to bear a more effective witness of faith, hope and love.” This is also a moment to thank God for the efforts of our many brothers and sisters from different ecclesial communities who refused to be resigned to division, but instead kept alive the hope of reconciliation among all who believe in the one Lord.¹

Commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation is not a celebration of the split which occurred in the Roman Catholic Church or the many atrocities and divisions which took place within the churches of the Reformers. There is much to be regretted that has happened within and to the Church through the centuries. To think about the Reformation is, however, a reminder that the Church in every time and place is in need of being re-formed just as every believer has the same need. What we do at this time is celebrate our unity in Christ and the wonderful diversity granted to us by a very creative God.

Our task is not simply to remember, but to act, to continue to share the Gospel, to spread God’s dream throughout the world and into the future. On one occasion, in the midst of all the upheaval in his life, both personal and spiritual, Martin Luther was asked what he would do today if he knew that he would die tomorrow. His answer was rather simplistic, “I would plant a tree,” he said.²

Luther’s concern was not what pleasure or prosperity he might enjoy today. His concern was what he might do to enhance life for the people who would follow him—who turned out to be you and me! Five hundred years ago, Luther planted a tree that has grown immensely over the years. The Christian Church is worldwide and as diverse as we could ever imagine. It includes Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox, and about twenty thousand different expressions of the faith we have in the Christ we all follow. That tree, the family tree of faith, is the dream God has for us all—to love and worship him and to love and live peaceably with one another. The dream persists because the love of God will never die. Not knowing what your tomorrow might hold, what will you do today?

¹Pope Francis, “Homily at the Ecumenical Prayer Service in Lund,” *Zenit* (October 31, 2016); available online at: <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-homily-at-ecumenical-prayer-service-in-lund/>.

²James A. Weaver, in *A Cloud of Witnesses*, C. Douglas Weaver, ed., (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993), 73.

October 29, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

So often music stirs our hearts, O God, bringing to mind all of the goodness we enjoy at your behest. So often music energizes our souls, reminding us of our calling and the core of our faith. But so often, when the music stops, our fears and reservations begin to wail and we shrink back from what the Gospel calls us to do.

We are thankful for every good gift that comes our way because we know that goodness is generated in your heart, O God. And we know that we are called to follow Jesus into service wherever that may lead. So forgive our hesitation and grant us courage and strength to serve you well.

We have no qualms about helping our friends but there are limits to what we can do. We appeal to you, O God, to help us with medical needs, challenging decisions, and situations that are beyond any human ability to overcome. Provide what we need and guide us to the resources you have already provided, we pray.

We pray for our world which must appear to you as angry, desperate, and uncaring. By your grace, you motivate us to love, goodness, and peace. Embolden us, O God, and give strength to our voices, our minds, and our bodies. Remind us of the calling to which we have been called.

We are a gifted people—your people. Continue to shape us into your partners in the Gospel through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.