

A Reading from the Letter to the Ephesians 4:1-6

As a prisoner for Jesus the Christ, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Christ, one faith, one baptism; one God and Creator of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The Word of Our God.
Thanks be to God.

Reformation Sunday
***Pulpit Exchange between Gethsemane Lutheran Church and
Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community***
October 30, 2011 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Today is Reformation Sunday, and we honor the reformers who sought to do what we, your community and ours, continually seek to do, - which is *to do* our part to keep the Church healthy, not only for its own sake, but so that it might be a beacon of peace and hope to the world. For an institution that lives only for itself will end up dying a lonely death by its own doing. We need each other not only to thrive, but also to survive. We need diversity to live and thrive. And so, in the spirit of ecumenism, in celebration of diversity, and in the spirit of the unity of the Church, recognizing that no one movement or denomination contains all members of the Body of Christ, we celebrate the ongoing reformation of the ever reforming Church, building bridges where once they were burned, for the sake of our single source. Thank you for having me, and sharing Gloria with our community this evening. As our reading says, there is one baptism, one spirit, one God of all.

Today *is* Reformation Sunday, and certain events in history are so iconic, so pivotal in the human story and the minds of people, that it almost feels like they had to happen. Like the inevitable and massive shifts in tectonic plates, we sometimes don't even know when we are rumbling toward a cataclysmic transformation of the human landscape, other times we have prophets who sense that the winds of change are blowing: "The days are surely coming... " says Jeremiah. Either way, when these seismic shifts and rifts happen, the world is forever changed. And as time unfolds we can't imagine it any other way. As if it had to happen. As if certain events are inevitable.

Like the way the Gospel writers depicted Jesus' whole life as a long walk to the cross - as if it had to happen. And what if it hadn't? I think also on Martin Luther King Jr's assassination. Gandhi's assassination. The burning at the stake of Joan of Arc - a woman doing a man's job, killed. Sadly, it often takes these horrors to turn our world around, often for the better - these cataclysmic events are unexpected upheavals in our

landscape, a de-formation of our true selves, no longer reflecting who we want to be. They set off reform.

The Jesus movement that followed Jesus' death, calling religious leaders to reform, ultimately led to a final unbridgeable rift between Judaism and the followers of Christ within less than a century. Even Paul in the Romans passage is enlarging the circle of faith, not cutting folks off. Paul underlines that Jesus came first to the Jewish people, then to the Gentiles. Ever widening concentric circles was the breadth of the mission, yet a not-so clean break was the result. Paul was trying to build the bridge back to Jerusalem, yet two faiths emerged, or rather, diverged, from ONE.

Martin Luther sparked what was hoped to be a cleansing fire for the church, clearing out deadened branches and rotting wood, making way for new growth, but the fire also burned bridges with Rome, and resulted in a hundred new forests with deep ravines in between where just ONE renewed landscape was hoped. Luther, and the reformers, never intended on creating a separate church, or many churches, just a better ONE.

Vatican II was a massive international conclave of Catholics that convened in the 60's over several years, - it was a new Reformation for Catholics. One baptism acknowledged, one faith embraced, one God, empowerment of the laity, and bridges across denominational ravines were promised. The spirit was moving, and wind blowing, the days were surely coming, it was felt, when priests would be able to marry tomorrow and women be priests the following week, and all the members of the Body of Christ would be in full communion. Then, true to history, a counter-reformation, if you will, ensued: Those calling for holiness and sanctity and tradition and continuity to be preserved, fearing the loss of centuries, were heard. We are still working this reformation out. The presence of MMACC is testimony that the wind that blew through the Vatican then still breezes fresh air in today.

The storybooks of history do a disservice if we ever think of reformation as a one time event. These are all reformations, and they continue today. The Church, too, evolves.

And so maybe "reformation" is a bit of a misnomer. There were so many reformations that led up to Luther, so many that came after. So many reformations before Vatican II for it to happen, and so many are now happening after. The soil has to be mulched and readied by a thousand fallen trees and ungerminated seeds for one to take, and the conditions just right for them to grow. Volcanic explosions can occur in a moment, but only after the long-seeking lava has sought a soft-spot in the earth's crust. And rarely is a mountain chain made in a day. Maybe reformation should not remind us of a point in time, but remind us of an ongoing reality for all. Fits and spurts and bouts around us and in us all the time.

Like the discovery that the earth was not the center of the universe. Like the realization that neither Jerusalem, nor Rome, nor the Wittenburg door were the ultimate theological centers of faith. Like the monastic reforms of the 12th century, before "the

reformation" where a certain Francis of Assisi, whom all denominations can fairly claim, called for an end to the crusades and the rediscovery of the sanctity of all life. Francis built bridges between humanity and all creatures as holy, as one. An early environmentalist. Francis built bridges with the Muslim sultan, created relationship, and was afforded space in the Holy Land. These important tectonic shifts in the history of faith that happened over the last millennia, challenge and continue to form and call us to continual reform, forging relationships not only across denominations, but also faiths, and indeed across creation.

Most of these reformations never intended to tear apart, but to build up. Not to destroy but to plant. Jesus, Paul, and Luther never intended on creating a new faith, a new church, a new religion, but rather went about weeding out agents of corruptive power that mine and quarry a people bare so that they can bear it no more.

The painful paradox is that the integrity of those calling for reform often leads to disintegrity- disintegration. Seeking reform often leads to division. Seeking wholeness can tear us apart. And yet it has to happen. The Lutheran church has known this. The Presbyterian and Methodist denominations are on the brink of splintering a new division yet again - all in the name of reform, on both sides. And the Catholic Church too. Our community, MMACC, we feel is a blossom that bloomed as part of the healing brushfire that cleared the way for new birth in the Catholic Church and yet that also forces excommunication, division, and seismic cracks along Vatican walls. The tension of reformation, that requires tearing the soil to precede planting, is always with us.

Now it's true that our rigid denominational walls are breaking down to become more like neighborhood fences everyday... And you have taken it further, you have shared with us, your own walls, your own house... The days are surely coming... The days are here to build and to plant.

But for all that, I would like, for today, not to end on reforming our own institutions, - they've got enough of that going on. But rather on reforming ourselves. Maybe if, just for today, or better yet, starting today, we hold back for a moment from trying to reform our church out there, and seek to reform our own communities of faith, we might do Reformation Sunday a great service. Instead of banging our heads against brick walls, perhaps we should look first to our own walls. Wisdom tells us that peace starts from within, so too does reformation start from within our own communities. Perhaps that is where the best reformation starts, from the inside out.

The old adage of when we point a finger at another, four others point back towards ourselves is sometimes true. It is true that we often have an easier time with critical thought on institutions out there, than to our own communities here. And it would seem that it is but one small step from seeing the fault out there in the world, in our Church, to reflecting on our part, as communities of the whole. It is but one small step, but it is one we rarely take, and it is perhaps the most important step, and the hardest.

And so, we, as communities, are called to reform ourselves, always - as long as the spirit moves. If we are to examine the institutions we claim, we must be all the more self-examining. Our common life, your common life, is a witness to the world. Your quality of life together, if taken seriously, will not only change you for the better, but it can also change the world. Our own communal and continual reformation can be an example that reformation does not have to be divisive, but can be relational. It can be as simple as being humble and gentle, being patient, bearing with one another in love. Community means a coming together of many into one. And what happens here might just catch on fire.

The spirit, God's own breath, the wind, stirred the waters of creation to form life, and it is that same air and those same waters that birthed us all and are in us all. All who are born are baptized, and formed, with this, wind and water. Our clarion call is to reform our own communities, ourselves, with that single source in mind. May our own reform reflect the oneness from which we came, and to which we are called. And perhaps our quality of life together will move the world to build bridges over the ravines we have forged, and to transform walls into friendly fences, with unlocked gates, as you have done for me, for our community, here today.