

# Reformation 2016 - "Straightforward"

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:1-7

May the pure, life-giving truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, restored to the human race through the Reformation, forever remain for you your single most precious possession. Amen.

Dear Fellow Inheritors of the Reformation, there is a time for make-believe, and a time for hard, blunt truth. A young child crawls onto grandpa's lap and begs him to tell a story. *That* may be a good time for make-believe. A couple of salty old-timers are sitting on a front porch in rocking chairs swappin' whoppers. *That* may be an appropriate time for make-believe. But when human beings (those who must stand before their God on Judgment Day) walk into their church, sit down in a pew on a Sunday morning, and prepare to worship and to hear God's Word, well, you tell me if *that* is an appropriate time for make-believe.

Make-believe has its place, but this – what we do in this building and on this our worship day – is not that place. This is the time for truth. Myths, fairytales, make-believe, and misdirection are as out of place here as a grunge band at a ladies luncheon. Distortions and half-truths are never appropriate, but especially not here, and especially not when it comes to our celebration of the Reformation. Here we will be reminded instead that, *like the gospel itself, the Reformation was, above all else, honest and straightforward.*

The text for this special celebration of God's gift of the Reformation that will remind us of that undeniable truth is found in Paul's Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth, the Fourth Chapter:

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:1-7** *Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup> For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of*

*Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> ¶ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

So far the very words of our God. We thank our God first of all this morning for "Sola Scriptura" (Scripture alone) - for restoring to his Church the assurance that these are not only verbally inspired words, but that they are to be the only sure and certain source of all that we teach and believe. With confidence in these the very words of our God, so we pray: ***"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

The Church of Luther's day was in dire need of reforming for many reasons, not the least of which was its lack of honesty. The religious leaders of Luther's day were lying both to their people and to themselves. They were not being straightforward, either with God or with man. Stop and think about it for a minute. Indulgences? Seriously? Pieces of paper that you could *purchase* that would grant you forgiveness of sins? The problem was that not only was the practice of selling indulgences utter nonsense, *everybody knew it*. Church leaders and lay-members alike knew full well that you can't buy forgiveness from a holy God with *money*. Virtually everyone involved knew better, yet they did it anyway. Why? Why carry on or participate in something that they knew to be rank hypocritical dishonesty?

The simple answer is that they *wanted* it to be true. The church leaders wanted the money that it brought in and the people wanted to be able to sin with impunity. It really didn't go any deeper than that. It was darkness masquerading as light, vice trying to pass itself off as virtue.

Nor was this the only deception of the day. The greatest fairytale in Luther's day was the Satanic heresy that man could earn God's forgiveness for his sins, and therefore his way into God's heaven, by his own good deeds. There were other lies, of course – prayer to Mary and the other "saints," the infallibility of the pope, purgatory, and the like – but the big lie was *and is* salvation by works.

Yet here again we mention such things not to point out faults in others but to drag into the light the evil that resides in our own hearts. You and I have more than enough make-believe and dishonesty in our own lives to worry about what others are doing. Dishonesty is alive and well also among us.

Is it honest, for example, to think of ourselves as mission-minded if we never give a personal witness of our faith to an unchurched stranger in our entire lives? Do we, as individuals or as a congregation, look outward or inward? In other words, do we look primarily to our own needs or to the critical spiritual needs of the unbelievers in our own community? Our Savior gave us our life's purpose just before he left this earth: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."** Is it honest to imagine that we are going a good job with that? God be merciful also to us, dishonest sinners all.

What is perhaps most surprising about the make-believe that finds its way into our hearts and churches is the fact that such things stand in utter, stark contrast to the Word of God and the gospel of our Savior Jesus. There we find the ultimate in honest, the very essence of *straightforward*. There we find no attempt to deny or downplay sin. There sin is acknowledged, and the cure is offered in connection with the blood of God's Son. There we find no attempt to style God's Word to fit in with the declining morals of this or any other society. We find instead the unashamed, straightforward revelation of the way things are. So also Paul says in our text: **"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."**

Such was also the case during the days of the Reformation. Martin Luther was, more than anything else, an honest man. He honestly evaluated his own spiritual condition and acknowledged that there was absolutely nothing that he could do to undo, or to make up for, all that he had done wrong. That was huge, especially in his case, because virtually every single one of his teachers and every single religious leader of his day was telling him in no uncertain terms that he not only *could*, he *must* earn his own forgiveness. But Luther was also honest in that he allowed the Word of God to dictate what he believed, even when it flew in the face of what he had been taught since childhood. So it was that while all around him he heard that he must earn his own forgiveness, he rediscovered in God's Word the declaration of God himself that *Jesus had already earned that forgiveness for him*. While his religious instructors were encouraging him to pray to Mary or one of the other saints, or to go on a pilgrimage, or to touch a sacred relic, he believed what the Bible taught – that **"there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all."** (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Today, as then, you and I need to be absolutely straightforward – in every way. The stakes are far too high for anything less. We need to be

straightforward – with our neighbor *and with ourselves* - that hell is a very real place and that every single soul who does not believe in Jesus Christ will certainly spend an eternity in that unspeakably horrible place. We need to be honest – with ourselves and with our neighbor – that God himself has determined what is right and what is wrong, and that man's personal opinions count for nothing in God's eyes. We need to be frank and open about the fact that there is only one path to heaven, and that one path is, and will always only be, by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

We face other challenges today, as did Luther and his followers in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Not the least of our problems today is the growing opinion that true Christianity is supposed to be neutral, non-judgmental, and indecisive. In a word, *weak*. To the world we have allowed ourselves to be identified or defined as social welfare centers whose members and leaders duck and dodge if asked to take a position on a Bible teaching that has fallen out of favor with our society. The church has, in other words, failed to be straightforward in declaring its call and mission.

On the contrary, what strength, clarity, and decisiveness God granted the Reformers that they were able to take a stand even when condemned and threatened by *both* the church and the state, by church leaders and by secular leaders alike.

The Christian faith is certainly anything but indecisive or compromising. We strive in all things for Christian balance, but there is nothing weak in balance – nothing non-committal or lukewarm or indifferent. The Reformation required drastic, decisive action – which should not surprise us. Christianity itself, from first to last, was born of such dramatic stuff. Already in the Garden of Eden the tone was set. After man had sinned, God cursed the ground and decisively and mercifully drove mankind from the Garden so that they would not eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in sin. When God saw that the world was too evil to survive, he sent the Flood and began over with Noah and his sons. When God saw that there was no nation suitable to bear the Promised Savior, God took the dramatic step of creating a new nation when he called Abram to leave father and mother, house and home, and to move to an unknown land. Down through the ages men of God were called upon to carry out such measures, leading finally to the most extreme action of all: God was made man and lived among us. That God-man Jesus then offered his perfect life in an innocent death on the cross, all in an effort to save man from his own sins.

There is nothing whatsoever that is indecisive or lukewarm about *any* of this. **"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son..."** Think about that for a moment. There is nothing indecisive or weak in what God has done for us in connection with his Son, Jesus Christ. He sentenced his own Son to pay for our sins with his very life. Because of that, you and I stand holy and righteous in God's sight. Your sins are forgiven! The act that won that forgiveness was honest, straightforward, and extreme.

Clearly God the Father would do something like that to his own beloved Son *only if there were no other way for you and me to be saved*. You and I wouldn't sacrifice our own child to save someone else if there were another way. We would never follow that path if there were another "bridge across the valley." How foolish, how less than straightforward, to imagine that God would. God the Father took such extreme action because *there was no other way*, for there is **"no other name, under heaven, given among men by which we could be saved."**

The Reformation was the epitome of straightforward in that it ruthlessly rooted out all that was false. In so doing God in effect blew up over a thousand years of dishonesty and oppression. Again, there should be no surprise here. The gospel itself is that way – God's simple, straightforward solution for man's impossible, damning sin problem.

And that straightforward honesty also had to touch our own lives. We here today have all received the gift of God's Son through that faith planted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. What happened in each of us was straightforward, but ruthless. Our old passions had to be *killed*. Paul put it this way in Galatians 2:20, **"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."** The old *me* also had to die with Jesus. Once we lived to sin, now we live to serve. Once we lived to or for ourselves, now we live to God. The change that conversion to Christianity brings is, and is by necessity intended to be, profound. It not only turns us from death to life, it brings a permanent shift in emphasis and lifestyle. Our text describes it this way: **"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."** Note the dramatic contrast is these words. By definition, darkness and light cannot coexist – the one cancels the other. So too true Christianity can know nothing of compromise or coexistence with error, deception, or unbelief.

Now, as we look to the future, we recognize not only the need to be straightforward with ourselves and our neighbor, but to carry God's Reformation both straight and forward. There must have been enormous

pressure on Luther, the lowly monk and priest, to vacillate, compromise, yield. He could not, would not do so, again, because he was an honest Christian man, and true Christianity knows nothing of falsehood or compromise. Yet it was not really Luther that held the line, was it? Our text tells us: **"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."**

This obviously represents great news for everyone here this morning. The power to stand against all opposition did not come from Luther; it came from Luther's God. That same God, and therefore that same power, is there for the asking still today – for us, jars of clay all. God himself has called us to carry these truths, straight and forward, to the next generation. Ask your God this morning for a double portion of the spirit that filled the Reformers, and know that through his Word he can and will work powerfully *in you and through you* still today. May God so bless our ongoing reformation. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

<sup>ESV</sup> **Revelation 14:6-7** Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. <sup>7</sup> And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 8:31-36** So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" <sup>34</sup> ¶ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

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Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

**Reformation Sunday – October 30, 2016**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 263 (Red Hymnal)

"O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe"

## The Order of Morning Service – Red Hymnal page 5.

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back of the bulletin)

**The First Lesson:** (Revelation 14:6-7) Protestant theologians widely consider this reading to be a reference to the coming of a special messenger sent from God – most typically a reference to Martin Luther. While this is certainly possible, we need to exercise caution in definitively assigning any prophecy to a specific individual unless Scripture itself does so. One thing we know to be true concerning this reading: God will never leave his people without a clear, sure witness.

**The Gospel Lesson:** (John 8:31-36) Our second Scripture reading ought to remind us that the truths regained through the Reformation need to become the personal possession of each successive generation. The Jews believed they would be saved because of their blood line. As Jesus disabused them of that baseless notion, so he would remind us this morning that each individual must stand before God. Though we have inherited the Reformation, that fact should never be allowed to give us a false sense of comfort or entitlement. The just shall live by faith alone.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Red Hymnal page 12)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn - 262 (Verses 1-2) (Red Hymnal)

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

## The Sermon - Text: 2 Corinthians 4:1-7 (Printed on the back page)

**"Straightforward"**

## "Create In Me" (The Offertory) (Red Hymnal page 12)

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 262 (Verses 3-4) (Red Hymnal)

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

## The Offering, followed by the Prayers

## The Closing Hymn – 261 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with congregations throughout the United States, as well as mission affiliates scattered around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

## Attendance - Sunday (35) Average (48)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship/coffee time
	<b>-11:20 a.m.</b>	– Church Council Meeting
	<b>-5:00 p.m.</b>	– Reformation Service in Bowdle
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>- No Midweek Classes</b>	
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship/coffee time

**CLC News** – Pastor Michael Gurath is considering the call to Zion of Atlanta. Pastor Matthew Ude is considering the call to Faith of Markesan. Pastor David Baker is considering the call to Grand Rapids.

**Church Council Meeting** – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning following the fellowship hour.

**Hurricane Relief for Haiti** – The recent hurricane that hit Haiti and took the life of more than 1,000 Haitians has also brought much loss and destruction to the pastors and congregations that we are working with there. The Board of Missions has authorized an initial \$3000 from the CLC Mission Development Fund (MDF) to assist our fellow Christians with recovery efforts. CLC President Eichstadt has authorized a special offering to replenish the MDF after this unexpected need. A Board of Missions visit to Haiti was already being planned before the hurricane and will now take place in late January or early February. If you would like to help, offerings can be made to the Mission Development Fund.

**Joint Reformation Service** – Our annual Joint Reformation Service is scheduled for 5pm today in Bowdle, with a fellowship meal to follow. Those planning to attend are invited to bring bars.

**Christmas Flowers** – Last day to order Christmas flowers. Please see the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table.