

“The New Deal”

Sermon on Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2025

Dear church,

The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the Lutheran Church and with the people of Saint Peters.

It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors in the 16th century when I took them by the hand and led them out of the confinements of the medieval, hierarchical Catholic church, because the Protestants too broke my covenant and misunderstood my Word.

This is the covenant I will make with them, declares the Lord.
I will put my law of love on their minds
And write it onto their hearts.
I will be their God
And they will be my people.

No longer will they try to teach their neighbor
Or lecture a person from a different religious tradition,
Because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.
For I will forgive their narrow-mindedness
And will remember their arrogance no more.

Dear church,
Every once in a while it is good to imagine how a familiar passage from Scripture may sound if it were set in our time, addressed directly to us, applied to the issues at hand. I hope this interpretation of Jeremiah 31 resonates with you.

In the past, Reformation Sunday was a big celebration of us, a Lutheran Feast, a remembrance of the values and beliefs that caused our spiritual ancestors to part with the church of their time, all the way back in the 16th century. It would be more correct to say that the church at that time parted with Protestants because they didn't fall in line. We had the audacity to think for ourselves, listen to the Holy Scriptures, make reform suggestions, and differ with the standard issue theology on various points. It was not well received.

Today though, to me at least, Reformation Sunday is not so much about Lutherans or Protestants; it is an opportunity for everyone to remind ourselves that the church always needs reform, because no matter who you are or what

tradition you belong to, this is what usually happens... Once life-giving beliefs turn into stale rules and laws over time. We may compare it to fresh water that, if left in a pool, turns foul and moldy and gets filled with bacteria. It needs to be connected to a fresh-water source. In the history of religion this principle of life and death has been repeated countless times, in every part of the world. Once spiritually nourishing and refreshing insights became a dead weight or an idol that pulled people down and away from God. Just look at the gospel for this Sunday...

In John 8, Jesus speaks to people from his own tradition, Jewish people. He says those words, which were famously enshrined on the original CIA headquarters and still serve as the motto of this clandestine organization. "The truth will set you free." That sounds pretty good, right? But Jesus' fellow Jews became defensive right away. "We are free. We are nobody's slaves. We are Abraham's children," is their response. They act like humans always do when we are criticized. What is our first impulse? Defend ourselves! And Jesus hadn't actually criticized them directly, but they received it as such. Human, all too human!

So, what does that mean for us today? People of St. Peter's, we can be just as set in our ways as the Jews were at Jesus' time, as the Catholic Church was during Luther's time, as many churches are still in our days. We can be just as stubborn and blind to our own blindness. This Sunday is always a welcome invitation to listen anew to God and allow the Spirit to transform our minds. The spirit of God works in people from all walks of life, all religions and even in those who don't adhere to a specific belief. What did Jeremiah proclaim? "No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

What Reformation means is not a new set of teachings. The old teachings are good enough. Can we ever top the Greatest Commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind - and love your neighbor as yourself." Can we top the Golden Rule? "Treat others as you would want to be treated." Can we find a more truthful summary of the gospel than what Luther proclaimed when he said, "We are saved by grace!" ? No, all of those core teachings are just fine - and always will be. We just have to learn to live by them.

Reformation can no longer be focused primarily on teachings and beliefs and fighting over words. It must be focused on our hearts. How much of those teachings travel down into our core and inform our daily lives, our way of thinking and feeling?

Back in those days, Jeremiah proclaimed a “new Deal,” to use FDR’s famous expression. And you may say, “Well, that New Deal is awfully dated, it is more than two millennia old.” Yes, it’s old... but it’s not OLD, it’s just true. Let the Word of God, the grace of God, the love of God dwell in your hearts and see what it does to you and your life. That’s Reformation!

Amen.