

First Sunday of End Time; Reformation; October 27, 2024

Revelation 14:6-7

“Always Be Reforming”

Then I saw another angel flying in the middle of the sky. He had the everlasting gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people. He said with a loud voice:

Fear God and give him glory,

because the hour of his judgment has come.

Worship him who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.

It is easy to think of the Lutheran Reformation as something in the past. And that's true. The Lutheran Reformation is history. And there are only two little pieces of history from the Lutheran Reformation that you are going to hear this morning. You may be relieved to hear that, but you also may rethink that relief when you see where this is headed.

Here is the one piece of Reformation past: When the disturbed monk who was trying to spark a debate posted the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg on All Hallows' Eve, the first thesis, or statement up for debate was this: "When our Lord and Master Jesus said 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of a believer to be one of repentance." What Luther saw was a Church where people were going through the motions and calling it repentance: hit the confessional once in a while, rattle through the mass (quicker the better), kneel, stand, genuflect, cross, pay, pray, repeat. In contrast, what he saw in the words of Christ was the demand for repentance on a deeper level: in inner, personal struggle against sin.

And that's half of all the Reformation history you're getting today. And it's all you need to tell you that the Reformation is not just history. If you see the Lutheran Reformation as merely names, dates, places, and events of the past, you're missing almost all of it. "When our Lord and Master Jesus said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of a believer to be one of repentance." And you are alive now, in the present. And you are a believer now, in the present. And your Lord and Master Jesus speaks to you now, in the present. And so, the Reformation is for you, today. It is the call of Jesus Christ to his people to always be repenting, always reforming within.

But our sinful hearts would like so much to keep the concept of reformation in the past, in dusty books on dusty shelves. Our spiritual laziness would so much prefer to make our own lives as Christians about merely going through outward motions than always reforming within. What has Christianity become to so many followers of Jesus? What does it become to all of us, at least sometimes? I drop into a building for an hour or two a week, or maybe once a month, or maybe just often enough to stay in the directory. I stand, I sit, I rattle through a creed and some prayers, I drop in an offering. Meanwhile, I keep my pet sins right where they are in my heart. My grudges inside remain undisturbed. My greed inside rests easy. My lust inside is comfortable and smug, knowing it won't be rustled. And then what happens to my motions, when I'm done sitting, standing, reciting, and passing the plates? The unreformed sin within quickly takes them over.

Are we inward reformers, examining first our hearts for evil? Do I care about removing that evil from the inside? Am I reforming myself? Is my entire life one of repentance? Because that is what Jesus demands: always be examining, always be identifying evil, always be reforming on the inside. Because what's inside needs to reform before any of the motions on the outside will please him.

In chapter fourteen of St. John's Revelation, we meet an angel flying in the sky. It is easiest to understand this angel (messenger) as all faithful messengers of God's Word. And listen to what the faithful messenger says: **Fear God and give him glory.** First fear God. Inside first! The heart needs to reform to fear God above all else, to honor him more than self and fortune and worldly success. Fear God first! Put him ahead of all else first, and then give him glory in all you say and think and do. Glorify him by keeping his commands, doing his will in your life *after* your heart has reformed to fear him first. First the heart needs to reform to fear God above all else! And do you see this? Every time I fail to give God glory by keeping his will, it is proof that I do not fear him perfectly in my heart. It is proof that I am not perfectly formed on the inside. It is proof that I still and always need inner reformation.

There is much at stake in this reformation of ours: **Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and springs of water.** God is real, and so is the hour of his judgment. You are going to stand before the God who said, "Let there be light," and there was. He said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together to one place," and they were. He said, "Let dry ground appear," and it did. God speaks, and it happens. He is going to speak a word to you on Judgment Day, and what he says to you will be what happens to you for eternity.

When our Lord and Master says, "Repent," he means for our whole lives to lives of repentance. Always be reforming.

I promised earlier that you were only going to get two little pieces of Reformation history. Here's the second: In a sermon he preached five years after nailing the 95 Theses, Martin Luther said, "Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise, I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philipp and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool's play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work. What do you suppose is Satan's thought when one tries to do the thing by kicking up a row? He sits back in hell and thinks: Oh, what a fine game the poor fools are up to now! But when we spread the Word alone and let it alone do the work, that distresses him. For it is almighty, and takes captive the hearts, and when the hearts are captured the work will fall of itself."

Luther is often called the Great Reformer. To my knowledge, he did not ever once call himself that. He gave all glory to God, specifically to the power of God's Word, for everything that happened to reform the Church, to pull it back to being about what's on the inside first, and then letting the motions follow the heart.

The Word is almighty and takes captive the heart. You cannot reform yourself by force. No amount of your own inner desire, no kicking and screaming and fomenting trouble in yourself is going to get it done. Do nothing to reform yourself. Let the Word do everything. Let this Word reform you and make your whole life one of repentance: "Take and eat; this is my body, given for you." This Word will capture you and reform you: "I called you by name in Baptism. You are mine." Don't even try to reform yourself with your own blood and tears. Only look to the Word of God incarnate, hanging on the cross, crying out and shedding his blood to save you from all sin. Do not reform yourself with threats of God's wrath, but let this Word do it: "It is finished." "There is

no now condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The Word reforms us. The Word, Jesus Christ, robes us in his righteousness and makes us holy – perfectly formed! – in the eyes of God.

To fear God, to trust in him above all things, to be reformed daily on the inside, is the work of the Word, Jesus Christ, found in the written Word, the Bible. The Word does everything to reform. **Then I saw another angel flying in the middle of the sky. He had the everlasting gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people.** This is God’s power – the Word of the gospel – to form and reform hearts that fear him.

And with hearts that fear him, we will give him glory. Our words and actions will express the heart of faith God has created within us. No longer merely going through motions, but doing everything – inside and out – to give glory to God. Hearts formed and reformed by the gospel are willing to speak his truth from the middle of flames, before rulers and authorities. They will give for that Word and sacrifice for that Word. And they will think, say, and do everything to God’s glory – which must with the heart of fearful faith.

Always be reforming. Dear God, form and reform us always. Make our whole lives, lives of repentance, from the inside out. Form and reform us in your Word. Amen.