

October 30, 2022 - Reformation Sunday

Prayer of the Day

Gracious and loving God, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; and where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Gospel reading - John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Sermon

When pastors get together, we sometimes joke about times when things seem to be going well, and there are no controversies or conflicts. We usually response by saying, "If you're not offending anyone, you're not doing your job!"

So, with that in mind...

I think, on this Reformation Sunday, that the church has something it can learn from Donald Trump.

Now, those of you who know me, know quite well that I am no fan of Mr. Trump! For a whole bunch of reasons. But I will say it again: I think, on this Reformation Sunday, that the church (yes, even the church in Canada) has something it can learn from Donald Trump.

Because when we look at what he has done, and what he is doing, we see what a "movement" looks like. Don't kid yourself - there is structure behind it. There is money, and committees, and institutions, and all the rest. But what he has created is not an "institution." It is a movement.

And it is not just a movement in the U.S. It has gone around the world. Remember the so-called "Freedom Convoy" going to Ottawa this summer, and truck horns blowing all night long? Even if he or his followers are not actually in charge of national governments, his movement is setting the agenda for pretty much everyone, pretty much everywhere, whether they like it or not.

As I said, I do not support the direction or the priorities of his movement. I think they are diametrically opposed to the direction we, as the church, are called to go. But when we, as the church, as ourselves, "Where is God calling us to re-form on this Reformation Sunday?", I think Mr. Trump is providing us with an answer.

I think we are called to let go of being an "institution," and embrace becoming a "movement."

Not that there is anything intrinsically wrong about being an institution. It's just that a primary goal of any and all institutions is self-preservation. And when things get "interesting" or difficult or challenging, as they are for the church right now, it is far too easy for us to get all "institutional," and worry about how we are going to survive in this new "interesting" environment, and worry about preserving our buildings, and obsess about filling all the positions on our

committees, and perpetuate the Sunday School, and make the budget, etc., etc. You know the drill! And when we do all of that, we forget about why we are here in the first place.

Fortunately, we, the church, have reminders in our own stories which can point us back to being a movement.

As most of you know, this year marks the 250th anniversary of the founding of Zion Lutheran Church in Lunenburg. This is the oldest operating Lutheran Church in Canada. And *one* of the reasons it has continued this long is because it has, at a number of times in its history, remembered that it is a movement, and not simply an institution.

This congregation began before the arrival of its first pastor. There were Lutherans in Lunenburg from Lunenburg's founding in 1753. The first challenge was that there was no pastor for the people. Which means there was no building, there were no committees, there was no budget, there was no "structure." But those early Lutherans understood, at some level anyway, that they were called to be a movement. So they worshipped in each other's houses, and they prayed, and they read their bibles, and they worked together to keep the movement going.

For 19 years! Institutions like quick fixes. Movements don't need quick fixes. They endured.

In 1772, a Lutheran pastor was finally found to come to Lunenburg. So they built a building on the corner of Fox and Cornwallis. We don't even know what this building looked like. But Zion had a home, right? They had "arrived," right? They were now an institution, right? They could relax, right?

Nope. They were a movement.

Sixty nine years later, they needed a newer, larger building. So, instead of selling the property and moving to a cheaper location (which an institution might have done), in 1841 they tore down their building and build a second one. If you go into the basement of the building today, you can still see some of the foundation stones from this second building, and if you look in the display cabinet in the front of the sanctuary, you will see photos of that second building.

So, Zion had an appropriately sized home now, right? They had *really* arrived now, right? The institution had fulfilled its purpose and grown, right? They could relax now, right?

Nope. They were *still* a movement.

Less than 50 years later, they tore down their second building and built a third one. On the corner of Fox and Cornwallis. One the same site and some of the same foundation stones of the previous buildings.

Let that sink in for a minute. There were members of Zion who had living memories of tearing down the building to replace it *twice* with a more appropriate structure. There were people who were old enough to remember doing it both times. This congregation set aside the constraints of being an institution for its own sake, and embraced being a movement.

And I think that's one of the real gifts of this 250th anniversary year - the knowledge and awareness that those ancestors of this congregation did not leave us a building, or an institution. They left us a ministry. They left us a movement.

Therefore, this congregation's 250th anniversary, this Reformation Sunday, and especially the gospel of God's unconditional love, *all* call to be a movement. But unlike Mr. Trump's movement, we are called to be movement of grace, and love, and forgiveness.

And this is a real gift, both to us as the church, and to the world. Because as "movements" like Mr. Trump's call institutions into question, responding by insisting on strengthening our old institution is really going to accomplish very little. After all, institutions are not, by nature, life-giving. But being a a movement of grace and love and forgiveness is *absolutely* life-giving.

Also, just so we all remember that we are not in this alone, many people are acknowledging this new reality, this new challenge, this new way of being. A few examples from people I have read just this last week.

Matthew Flinders is the founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics, at the University of Sheffield. In talking about the current state of politics in the UK, he writes,

*Now that the country is on the other side of Brexit, it finds itself in a world that is, as Putin's invasion of Ukraine has shown, almost **defined** by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity [not to mention cruelty and violence]. These are risks that demand close friends and strategic alliances; not rigidity, closed thinking and empty rhetoric.*

It think it is instructive that his remedy for the craziness and danger of the world is found in **relationships**. "Close friends and strategic alliances" are two of the things that church does exceedingly well... **when we remember** that we are a movement of love, grace and forgiveness.

Zaina Qureshi is a youth activist (she's just 17!) with a group called Springtide Research. She says,

*Growing up in this environment has motivated us to re-evaluate what faith **outside** of religious institutions might look like. Faith is no longer about attending church on Sunday, blindly following tradition, or finding all of our answers in scripture. Faith is about developing a morality that seeks to preserve humanity in a time when those claiming to be leaders are actively working to destroy our world. (Emphasis added)*

This might be hard to hear for those of us who have grown up with "You need to attend church." But I think she is pointing us away from institutional thinking, and is pointing us **toward** being a movement; a movement in which faith is the driver, a life-giving and life-affirming movement of faith, love and forgiveness, which embraces all of creation for its **own** sake, and not only for the sake of corporate institutions.

Finally, a word from someone in the church. Tony Campolo is an author and speaker who cares deeply for the church **as a movement**. He writes,

*Jesus never says to the poor, "Come, find the church." Jesus say to **the church**, "**Go into the world and find the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned.**" (Emphasis added)*

Tony Campolo reminds us again that the church is not a building or an institution which people have to join in order to be fulfilled, or even valid. The church is a community, a movement. It is people who are grabbed by the Good News, and who respond with lives of love, grace and forgiveness.

Being a church of the Reformation, being a church which is being re-formed, being **people** who are being re-formed, is a challenge! It's hard! It's uncomfortable! Which is why it's so easy for us to fall back on our institutions, on our buildings and structures, on our committees and memberships rolls. And yes, in this anniversary year, it can be easy for us to fall back on our history, and tell ourselves, "We've finally made it. We've arrived. We're a solid, 250 year old institution, so now we can relax. Right?"

Nope!

Because we are **still** a movement, which is, once again, being called into a new way of being. Once again, we are being called to tear down our old stuff, so that something new can arise. Once again, we are being called to let go of being that respectable institution on the hill, so that we

can, once *again*, become the church, a re-forming movement in this world, a community grabbed by Good News, and sent to God's hurting world, to live lives of love, and grace and forgiveness.

Hey! Lutherans and Anglicans of Lunenburg county (and where ever else you might be!)!
Let's move. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - We offer our prayers to God, trusting that, because of Jesus' promise, we will be heard.

[*Short pause*]

A - Reforming God, you have come among us with grace and love, and have changed us from what we were. We give thanks for the gift of life. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Reforming God, you *continue* to come among us with grace and love, and invite us *again* into new ways of being. We give thanks for the gift of growth. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Reforming God, we confess that we are not always eager for the changes you bring. We are comfortable with the past, and the future is ambiguous. Remind us that it is your grace and love which is leading us forward. We give thanks for the gift of faith. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Reforming God, you do not call your church simply to restructure our committees or use a different liturgy. You call us *out*; you call us *away*. You call us to become a *movement* which is in touch with the hurting neighbour, the racialized stranger, the hungry, the angry, the ignored. We give thanks for the gift of dreams. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Reforming God, you are found with the sick, the outcast, the disturbed, the grieving, the different. Use us to touch those we name before you with your healing love and gracious presence.

[*Long pause*]

We give thanks for the gift of wholeness. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Reforming God, re-form *us*. Change our expectations. Break our *status quo*. Free us to embrace your movement among us. Free us to *be* your movement in the world. We give thanks for the gift of our calling. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.