

Devotion, Week of October 22, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

This coming Sunday we will celebrate Reformation Sunday. What does it mean to be a reformed church? The Protestant Reformation was a religious reform movement that swept through Europe in the 1500s. It resulted in the creation of a branch of Christianity called Protestantism, a name used collectively to refer to the many religious groups that separated from the Roman Catholic Church due to differences in doctrine. "Protestantism" comes from the word "protester," since this branch protested a number of doctrines of the Catholic Church. Martin Luther, although not the first, was the most notable reformer.

Luther, a Catholic monk, was so incensed when he visited Rome and saw pilgrims crawling up the stairs of the cathedral to earn forgiveness for their sins that he published a document he called "Disputation on the Power of Indulgences", or "95 Theses," in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. The document contained 95 ideas about Christianity that he invited people to debate with him. These ideas were controversial because they directly contradicted the Catholic Church's teachings.

Luther's statements challenged the Catholic Church's role as intermediary between people and God, specifically when it came to the indulgence system, which in part allowed people to purchase a certificate of pardon for the punishment of their sins. Luther argued against the practice of buying or earning forgiveness, believing instead that salvation is a gift God gives to those who have faith. That is where we get our strong emphasis on "grace." We don't earn grace: it is a gift from God.

John Calvin in France agreed with Luther's ideas and also protested the idea that Holy Communion was really the body and blood of Christ. He believed strongly that people should be able to read the Bible in their own languages without the intervention of a priest. People should be independent in their relationship with God, taking personal responsibility for their faith and referring directly to the Bible, the Christian holy book, for spiritual wisdom, rather than being dependent on the Pope or Priests for spiritual guidance.

Henry VIII brought Protestantism to England in 1534 because the Pope would not grant him a marriage annulment. Subsequently, King Henry rejected the Pope's authority, instead creating and assuming authority over the Church of England, a sort of hybrid church that combined some Catholic doctrine and some Protestant ideals. John Knox is one of the founders of our parent church, the Church of Scotland, or the Presbyterian Church. He studied with John Calvin in Geneva after being exiled from England during the reign of Mary I, Henry VIII's Catholic daughter. In 1560, he and 5 other ministers wrote The Scots Confession, which we will use part of during our service this coming Sunday. He helped establish Presbyterian polity, where the church is not governed by popes or bishops, but by elected presbyters, or elders.

We come from a proud tradition of believers. Come and worship with us on Sunday as we celebrate, and stay for our congregational meeting to elect elders – those presbyters that John Knox felt so strongly about guiding the church.

Jeanne