

Reformation Sunday 2017

1 Peter 2: 4-10

If you're a seven year old, what happens two days from now is something so exciting that only Christmas and your birthday exceeds it for joyful anticipation.

Because there will be costumes. There will be candy.
And if you're seven, life does not get much better than that.

If you're a **seventeen** year old, what happens two days from now is something else entirely,
and the anticipation for this is definitely *less* joyful.
November 1 marks the first of the college application deadlines ...
and so while your younger siblings are running around the house clutching Twix bars and Kit Kats,
you, high school senior that you are,
are sitting at the computer desperately trying to condense the essence of your personality into 650 words. Before midnight.

I don't have a high school senior in the house this Fall,
but I am still keenly aware of this week's deadline
because I **also** have to meet it.
I don't have to write 650 words about me, fortunately —
what I have to do is actually *lots* more fun: I get to write about kids I love.
Because I, as their pastor, am writing their college recommendations.

You may laugh at this, but not infrequently I start crying when I'm writing recommendations.

Seriously.

These kids I'm writing about — these are kids I baptized,
these are kids that I taught lines to for the Christmas pageant when they were Shepherd number 8.

These are kids I played crazy games with in youth group,

kids who now stand up here every month and help lead worship.

So, yeah, I get pretty emotional.

And I tell these colleges that they **have** to take these kids,

because they are bright and delightful and responsible

and they have made me laugh and I love them

and for heaven's sake I BAPTIZED these children so I should be taken seriously.

That is what I say. Or words to that effect.

And what always kills me, just kills me,

is knowing that no matter how beautifully I've written,

there will still be schools that have the audacity, the sheer audacity, to reject my kids.

Inevitably, sometime in the next several months,

there will be church teenagers whom we love who will get letters that say “thanks but no thanks.”

Yes, there will also be a whole bunch of “come on in!” letters, too,

but there will still be the ones that hurt, that exclude, that reject.

And I know what you're going to say,

that rejection builds character, but no — rejection just stinks.

I want **everyone** to get in.

I understand that's impossible. I know Yale doesn't have that many dorm rooms.

But still. I want everyone to get in. To be included.

Which brings me to **today**.

Today is Reformation Sunday — not just here at Greenfield Hill,

but in every Protestant church worldwide —

and it's a big one this year, because it was 500 years ago this Tuesday

that a Catholic priest named Martin Luther wrote down 95 ideas for how to reform the church,

and nailed them on a church door in Wittenberg for all to see.

For the past two Sundays, David has been sharing the story of the Reformation, and what it means to him to be a Protestant today.

Today I get to tell you why that 500 year old event matters to me.

And for me, it comes down to what I was just saying.
 I want everyone to get in.
 I don't want anyone voted out.
 I don't want anyone rejected.
 For me, as a Protestant pastor, the watchword is inclusion —
 the inclusion I've experienced —and the inclusion I want for all.

So today, I'm talking about two central tenets of Protestantism,
 and no, you don't have to write them down, they won't be on the exam —
 These two big concepts are **the priesthood of all believers**
 and **justification by faith alone**.
 But all I really want you to remember is the word inclusion.
 Because that's ultimately what they're both all about.

So yeah, the year 1517 is what everyone's talking about today,
 but I actually want to take you back to about 1500 years before that —
 back to Jesus, who, as David pointed out two weeks ago,
 was the **first** real protest reformer.

And Jesus, Jesus was *crazily* inclusive.
 In a way that was jaw-dropping to everyone who witnessed it.
 When he decided that what his ministry needed was some additional helpers,
 the people he went and grabbed hold of were a motley crew indeed.
 His disciples included uneducated fishermen,
 and a despised tax collector.
 He also welcomed women onto the team —
 Joanna, the bible says, and Susanna, and (quote) “many others”.
 Whaaaaat? Nobody did that.
 You weren't even supposed to *talk* to women about God.
 Plus, Jesus had dinner with lepers ...
 He was cool with Samaritans — who were also reviled.
 He liked it when kids turned up to listen — again, nobody did that.
 The truth is, there is no story of Jesus rejecting **anyone**.

Everyone was included.

Which is why, in the years to come,
the **followers** of Jesus included everyone too.

In those early years, everyone was in.

They worshiped in living rooms,
women read scriptures, men led prayers, anyone was welcome.

And they went around telling everybody the good news —
men preached, women preached, to anyone and everyone.

And around about then, Peter wrote the letter that Carole just read from.

It was a letter written to fellow Christ-followers,
and it's lovely, because he said "all of you, my sisters and brothers, you are together
creating something beautiful and new".

He wrote

you are now a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, [proclaiming]
the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

But then things changed.

Folks lost sight of the idea that **together** they were a royal priesthood,
lost sight of the fact that all of them **together** were to tell out the good news.
And instead they created structure and hierarchy and
priests who were special and different and a little closer to God — and
definitely not women.

And so it was for 1500 years.

Until Martin Luther came across that passage from Peter's letter again.
You are all God's own people, he read, you are all a royal priesthood. All.

Wait a minute, said Martin Luther.

We're ALL priests? Is that what that means? I think that's what it means.
And he wrote that, and he published it:

“We are all born priests,” he wrote.

Which means, he said, we’re all **in**.

There’s no special group that’s got better access to God.

We are all included.

There’s no exclusive club that’s allowed to read the Bible and talk about it.

We **all** get to do that.

The *priesthood of all believers* is what this came to be called:

and it is one of those foundational tenets of Protestantism.

You, and you, and you —

you are **all** priests of God, which means you all can talk directly to God whenever you want,

and you all get to read those scriptures right there in your pew bibles,

and God is counting on **all** of you to proclaim the good news about the One who called you out of darkness into light.

The priesthood of all believers.

Now, I’m personally pretty fond of this particular tenet of Protestantism, because without it I wouldn’t be standing here in this pulpit.

Because once you declare that every believer has direct access to God, once you declare, as Luther did, that every believer can read scripture and proclaim the good news,

then really what you’re saying is that no believer should be excluded from the pulpit just because they’re, say, a woman.

It’s pretty much a straight line from saying “priesthood of all believers” to saying “the pulpit should include everyone.”

That said, it took more than three hundred years for Protestants to walk that straight line —

the first ordination of a woman preacher happened in 1853, in a Congregational church.

And still, still there are plenty of Protestant churches who choose to exclude.
But not here. And I'm grateful.

Because I can't imagine doing anything else.

And my heart breaks for my sisters in faith who are in churches – Protestant or Catholic – that won't let them lead and won't let them preach.

My heart hurts for those whose only choice is to stay and be silent,
or leave the only faith homes they've ever known.

So yes, I'm grateful for that moment when Martin Luther read 1st Peter and said "Wait, what?"

But hold on just a minute.

If we have **all** have direct access to God –
if you don't **need** a priest to talk to God for you,

then why do you need me at all – right?

What the heck are David and I doing here at all?

Well, yeah, it's true – you **don't** need us.

At least, not to get yourself right with God.

Hopefully we're useful in other ways,

but you don't need us to get God on the phone for you,

you don't need us to plead your case to God for you,

or speak your prayers for you.

If you come to my office to see me because something is weighing heavy on
your heart;

if there's a burden of guilt you're carrying for a hurt you've caused,

if you come to me seeking forgiveness,

my role is **not** to forgive you,

my role is **not** to absolve you from that guilt.

Because you know why? It's already been done for you.

You are already forgiven.

My only role, the church's role, is to remind you that you are already forgiven.

Did you hear what Carole said to us earlier in the service?

After she gave us time for confession, after she gave us time to think about those things for which we need forgiveness, she said this, she said: Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

She didn't say: "Hopefully God will forgive you."

She didn't say: "Alida will ask God to forgive you."

She didn't say: "Try a little harder, maybe God will relent."

What she said was "In Jesus Christ, we ARE forgiven."

And this is where that other phrase I threw at you earlier comes in. Justification by faith.

It means that simply by believing, simply by stepping into the arms of God's love and grace, whatever you've done or been has already been forgiven.

You don't have to earn it.

You don't earn the love of God, you don't work to achieve the grace of God, it is there for you to receive.

That's the other big *big* thing that Martin Luther and the others "got" about God,

that's the second tenet on which we now stand: justification by faith.

You don't get right with God, they said, by doing X number of prayers or X number of good deeds or X amount of penance.

Because of Christ, we are **already** made right with God.

There's a lot we do in this world that requires us to prove ourselves.

All those college applications being written this week, that's what they're about: proving one's self.

GPA's and test scores, writing samples and yes, my recommendations.
All done to prove worthiness of acceptance.
The love and forgiveness of God is not that way.
It is freely given, unconditional, it is ours when we open our hearts to it.
That vast amazing boundless inclusive love that Christ came to show us:
that's what God's love is.
We are loved – as we are.
We are accepted – as we are.
We are forgiven.

And this, this isn't some remote piece of theology,
this isn't some old historic tidbit –
this is life changing and life saving stuff.
You remember the guys who stood up here last week and sang?
The men of Pivot Ministries?
Those guys who sang gospel for us last Sunday,
they are where they are and who they are now
because they found out, they found out,
that they are loved as they are by a God whose love has no boundaries,
they found out that they have already been forgiven
and the only thing they had to do was **believe** it.
One of the men once said to me, "I did so many things wrong I couldn't believe
that I could ever be forgiven.
I couldn't believe that I could ever begin again.
And then I found out that Jesus had already paid it all up for me. For me."

Justification by faith sounds like a pretty dry theological phrase.
But it is life. And it is hope. And it is real.

Priesthood of all believers.
Justification by faith.

As I said, there won't be any exam later on these two foundations of Protestantism.

All you have to remember is that we worship the God of inclusion.

In this church where everyone is welcome to walk through these doors, where everyone is invited to share bread and cup, and anyone's journey here is okay by us, we worship the God of inclusion.

In this church where anyone can stand right where I'm standing, in this church where everyone learns that they are already forgiven, we worship the God of inclusion.

Yep.

That's really all you need to know.

Amen.