

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 22, 2017
Sermon Title: The Protestant Reformation - Part II
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Faith Litany

Our Faith Litany

Leader: Therefore, since we are justified by faith WE HAVE PEACE
WITH GOD through Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

Congregation: *Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what
we do not see.* (Hebrews 11:1)

Leader: The only thing that counts is faith. (Galatians 5:6)
Lord, increase our faith! (Luke 17:5)

Congregation: *(But) faith without works is dead.* (James 2:7)

Leader: Through Christ everyone who believes is justified from
everything you could not be justified from by the law.
(Acts 13:39)

Congregation: *Christ was raised to life (from the dead) for our justification*
(Romans 5:25)
. . . we are justified freely by his grace. (Romans 3:24)

ALL: Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what
we do not see. (Repeat) (Hebrews 11:1)

Settle in! Another pre-sermon explanation of the sermon: Are you excited about a sermon on Transubstantiation, Priesthood of All Believers, Justification by Faith? And, if you sit still long enough, we could do indulgences, excommunication, Mary, the pope, the saints, and everything else that has divided Christianity for so long!

I'm kidding about most of that; we are sticking to the big ideas that were kicking around Christianity 500 years ago.

For those who weren't here last Sunday, we are using three weeks to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, often called "the Protestant Reformation," but which really was a reformation, renewal, of all of Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, in ways good and bad. From killing one another to arguing with one another to ignoring one another to liking one another has taken a long, long time.

Here is a brief summary of last week: Thinking about the Reformation and this sermon, it is not anti-Catholic or anti-Protestant. The Reformation was a family squabble, Catholics protesting other Catholics about how to be better Catholics. Everybody was Catholic until the protesters got kicked out or quit and suddenly become "Protestant." Within a century or two, they had divided Europe like a birthday cake, with a slice for everybody but without the good wishes.

Over time, things settled down, the killings morphed into persecution, persecution into oppression, oppression into prejudice, prejudice into begrudging ecumenism, into begrudging "Let bygones be bygones."

Alida and I have done over a thousand weddings, half of them at least, "mixed marriages," and half of them had somebody who would not attend or held their nose when they did attend.

Those of us of a certain age grew up with prejudice that was ugly, most of it juvenile. In my sermon last week, I took us beyond such ugliness to imagine Church defined not by the dead past but the living Christ. Today we try harder.

It hasn't been easy. Most of us have family stories we don't like to tell—some bigoted relative, some nasty comment when some family member married into the other religion.

The Protestant Reformation began in October 1517, when Martin Luther nailed the list of 95 Theses to the front door of the main Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The Pope didn't like it. Luther didn't like the Pope. Their followers started fighting one another. We had the 30 Years' War, people got burned at the stake, 8 million people killed, the protesting reformers broke away and became Protestants. Luther married a nun, a new religion was born, and then the other protesters came up with their own wrinkles.

So we have Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and finally, us, Congregationalists. We are the folks who didn't like anybody telling us

anything, so we broke from everybody. That's why we're called Congregationalists. Because the *congregation* is in charge.

Most of what I just said is correct. Except Luther did not start the Protestant Reformation. He made it famous. He made it work. He knew how to market himself brilliantly. But seriously, what makes the Reformation? Reformation, any kind of reformation, is just somebody looking at something, thinking, "You know what? We can do better. Let's fix it."

Today we have our Pivot House friends with us, always a highlight at our Church. Who are these men? These are "protesting reformers." A "protester" is someone who takes a stand *for* something or *against* something. It can be personal. It can be societal. Or national or worldwide. These men took a stand against their past and whatever broke them: drugs, alcohol, whatever. For the Pivot men, it's personal. They are at Pivot House because at some *pivotal* moment, each man looked in the mirror, didn't like what he saw, and God whispered in his ear (or maybe shouted), "We can do better. Let's fix this." And maybe some family member helped push them. Maybe the court system or a prison term, or maybe it really was God speaking, shouting, demanding, protesting, and saying, in effect, "Reform! Don't stay where you are. Don't keep doing what you're doing, because it's not working. You can do better."

In other words, "reformation" is universal, historical, ever present. At some time in every person's life, in every organization's life, in every religion's life, they need reformation. It didn't start or end with Luther.

Everybody knows I love Prague. I mention it in just about every sermon. The first time I went there, I had no idea what to expect. I just went there years ago to write. My hotel was right there in Old Town Square, and if you've been there, you'll remember a gigantic statue of Jan Hus leading the Czechoslovakian people to freedom and enlightenment. I didn't know who Jan Hus was. It turns out Jan Hus was a Roman Catholic priest, 100 years before Luther, who protested for the same reforms: more freedom for the people, worship in the people's language, and what was called "full Communion."

I didn't know any of this. That very first night in Prague, I attended a concert in an old stone 13th-century Church and while waiting for it to begin, I looked around and saw a chalice carved into the stone wall, a life-sized image of a Communion chalice carved into stone. I had no idea what that was about. The next day I stumbled across Bethlehem Chapel, and to my delight, Bethlehem Chapel had been Jan Hus's Church! It was all starting to come together: the massive statue of Jan Hus in Old Town Square, the chalice carved into a Church's stone wall, and now Bethlehem Chapel, all within a few hundred yards of one another.

So, I went to Bethlehem Chapel, stood at Jan Hus's pulpit, sat in the pews, stared at a gigantic mural of Hus being burned at the stake, then went up to his study, which is now a little museum, and that helped me get the bigger picture. This was the Church from which Jan Hus, a Catholic priest, sought to reform Catholicism by his protests, 100 years before Luther, demanding, among other things, the chalice. But why the chalice? Well, this little mystery brings us closer to understanding the Reformation and maybe, just maybe, understanding a way forward.

In those days, and often today, Holy Communion is the bread and wine, but only the priest gets the wine in the chalice. Everybody else gets only the bread. The Catholic Church teaches "transubstantiation," the priest changes the substance of the bread and the wine into the flesh and blood of Jesus. Trans: change; substantiation: substance. At Jesus's Last Supper, he gave the Disciples bread and wine and told them, "This is my body, this is my blood; eat it, drink it, in remembrance of me."

The Catholic Church takes that literally. After the priest blesses the bread and wine, it is now fully, clearly, 100 percent the body and blood of Jesus. And taking *all* of it, both bread and wine, is what Jesus commanded. But the priest gave the people only the bread.

So, Jan Hus protested: "We want the wine," he said, *the cup, the chalice; we want full communion. We want to reform the Church to put it in language we understand, to allow everybody full communion, not half, to look at the Bible and do what the Bible says, not tradition, not the bishops.*

Hus was saying, in effect, "Hey, I'm a priest. Here's my Bible. We can read it for ourselves, this is our Church, we can do better, let's protest and reform." This was 110 years before Luther.

Well, Hus was "invited" to defend his protest and was burned at the stake. The Czech people rose up against Catholicism, and their battle flag featured, you guessed it, the chalice! Over the next 600 years, and most certainly over the next 400 years, a lot of Protestants and Catholics killed one another in the name of their preferences, ideas, symbols, leaders. All of that is a stain on the Christ both claim.

But today is not about stain. It's about what matters and why I've already explained "transubstantiation," but I need you to really grasp it. The priest takes the bread, plain old bread, and wine, common red table wine. God empowers the priests to change that into the very real, very literal, very flesh and blood of Jesus. I don't think the average modern-day Christian can get that. Not in the way Christians did 500, 600 years ago.

But you go to Church. Jesus is there. The world is dark outside. The plague, superstitions, bad forces, natural and supernatural. Death is everywhere, soon and young and capricious. But you go to Church and Jesus is there. You can touch him. You can taste him. He's that close, as close as the priest with the bread and the chalice.

One of the great women of the 20th century was the Catholic Church's new saint, Mother Teresa. After she died, the Church published her private letters, one of the most special books I've ever read. In the book, she tells us how much Holy Communion meant to her, how she yearned for it each morning. You see, in the Catholic Church, especially in old-style Catholicism, a nun is married to the Church, to Christ. Mother Teresa referred to Jesus as her spouse, her husband. However, they were too busy for each other.

All day long, Mother Theresa had the lepers to care for, the hungry to feed, the dying to comfort, orphans to nurture. And Jesus, sitting at the right hand of God, had the whole universe to watch over. But each morning for a half-hour in the little chapel in Calcutta, Mother Teresa met her beloved spouse, Jesus. He was there in the bread, he was there in that chalice, and she could touch him . . . and taste him. In those brief minutes, Jesus was all hers. If you allow yourself to enter into that thinking, then we can see why Jan Hus and Martin Luther would beg, protest, fight to have the chalice, the *whole* Communion, all of Jesus, not just some. People died for that, killed, killed to get it, killed to keep folks from getting it. It was that sacred.

Well, Protestants came along, and did what we do best: fight, argue, divide, subdivide, all over little huffy snits about which Bible to use, how much water to baptize with, who is really saved, when Jesus will return and, yes, about Communion. To be blunt, Protestants devalued Communion. We elevated preaching and the Bible and various doctrinal differences from profound to silly. But we devalued Communion. The bread and cup are symbols. I lift up the bread, it is still bread. You eat it, it's bread. I lift up the chalice, it's grape juice. You get your grape juice in those tiny plastic cups, it's still grape juice. Plus, we do it less. In our Church, once a month; some Churches, only quarterly. And if you've read my books, you know I've done my part to be trendy and faddish, I served beer and pretzels once for Holy Communion. Yes, I know, it's amazing I'm still a pastor! We spent centuries trying to bring Christianity down to our level, which is not always the best thing.

Some years ago, I had an opera singer in my Church choir. With a big, deep baritone voice, he sat right behind me. On Communion Sunday I said, "Jesus took bread and broke it and said, 'This is like my body . . . And Jesus took the cup and gave it to his disciples and said, 'This is the symbol of my blood.'" And every Communion Sunday, my opera singer baritone would belt out, "No! This

is my body, this is my blood," he boomed. I gave in. First of all, he was right; second, he had a bigger voice. My point—and his—is we've lost something in translation from Catholic to Protestant, from sacred to common.

We are not alone in remembering the Reformation. Yale Divinity School had a series of outstanding guest lecturers last week, and the first one really gripped me. The speaker was a professor from Dartmouth, and his main point was that Protestantism moved away from Catholicism, turned against all things Catholic, became more based on reason and intellectualism. Along the way, we lost the sense of mystery, of miracle, of God at work in ways beyond reason. He used a phrase I liked, "robust sacramentalism," he called it. We need "robust sacramentalism." Let's not be afraid of a little mystery in Church.

My own faith journey mirrors this. I was raised about as Protestant as you can get, with a beloved grandfather whose anti-Catholicism was deeply rooted. When I was a young pastor, Grandpa would ask me what our Church was doing, and I'd tell him about some Advent or Lent or Holy Week thing, and he'd say, "That's Papist! Roman! What are you thinking?"

Much of my career as a pastor has been on the real Protestant end of Protestantism. As a Baptist, all emphasis is on the individual. "Soul liberty," we called it. The individual before God. Individual salvation. Individual reading of the Bible. Individual decision. Individual Church. Nobody telling you anything. But in the Protestant urge to rid itself of all things Catholic, we sometimes overdo it.

Probably the best example is Mary, the mother of Jesus. While Catholics elevated Mary to "Queen of Heaven," Protestants turned her into "who's that?" Just a side story to Christmas. Is it possible that there is a middle ground? Out of 12 billion people who have lived on this planet, Mary was chosen to be Jesus's mother. Isn't it possible she was a cut above? Maybe worthy of a little what . . . adoration? Mention? Praise? Gratitude?

My father once pastored a Church with a good number of anti-Catholics. One December he preached a sermon about Mary, and some folks walked out! Next year, the same thing. So the third year he preached four times on Mary to see if he could clear everybody out! In our Church we do honor Mary unapologetically. We don't worship her or pray to her, but we'll admit she's one of a kind, worthy of some real reflection.

I'll admit, I'm on a spiritual journey that, frankly, is focused on what works. In my travels, I see what others do in other Churches, other religions, and they wouldn't keep doing it if it didn't work to some degree. In Serbia and in Prague, I got up early each morning to go to an Orthodox Church, where people, young

and old, start their day walking up to icons, paintings of Jesus, the Holy Family, or saints, and one by one, they kiss the icons, run their fingers over them embrace them. I did it. And in Catholic Churches across Europe, Alida will tell you, when we go, I spend more money lighting candles in cathedrals than on dinner at a fancy restaurant.

This old New England Protestant pastor standing in front of some altar—high altar, side altar, crucifix, statues, relics, stained-glass—lighting candles—small ones, tall ones, electric ones. And with each one I'm thinking of you, specifically by name, often out loud. I'm remembering who's sick, who's recovering, who's having a baby, who died, who needs a job, who's getting married.

In July, I was in Bratislava and went to Mass at St. Francis Church. I didn't have any money, so I asked the person next to me if I could borrow €10 to light candles. He said, "You need that many prayers?" I said, "Well, I actually need more." He gave me €20.

Alida will tell you that last April when we were in Florence, we went into this Church. I am lighting candles here, there, and everywhere, and a priest comes up right behind me and blows them all out! Like he knew I was Protestant or something. I was furious all day.

Now, what's a candle? Beeswax, a little string, a flame. Not much, really. But then again, what's the flag? Cloth, stitching, dye, that's it. Right. Look at the ruckus across America this last month about what a flag is. Is it about our values? Our soldiers? How do we respect it? Use it? Give meaning to it? People fight for it. Die for it. Kneel for it. Stand for it. But whichever side you're on, it's more than cloth, stitching, and dye.

There's an old saying about ideas, "Let's hoist it up the flagpole and see who salutes!" Frankly, that's my approach to our Church life. I don't give a hoot about what's Protestant, what's Catholic. I'm looking for what's good enough that it'll make you salute.

Now, may I close with one tiny point? I've spent two sermons celebrating the roots of Christianity, the Catholic roots of the Reformation. I even referred to the Catholic Church as our spiritual parent last week; and this week I shared my affection and respect for Catholic practices. And both weeks I have talked about Christ as breaking down any dividing walls between us, urging us to be beyond Protestant or Catholic, to be Christlike; and in pursuit of being Christlike, to choose for ourselves what works.

Here's the fun part. Here's the celebration of the Reformation part. I can do that, I can say all that because this is a Protestant Church. All those protesting

reformers, as curmudgeonly as they could be, as dogmatic as they could be, as hard-shelled, narrow-minded, exclusive as is they could be, their protests led to our freedom.

You and I, we get to decide what we like, we get to find what works, we get to try something new or old, all because of a bunch of noisy, brash, heretical protesters who dared each and every one of us, Protestant and Catholic, to do better.

This old Baptist, who loves Mary, can't wait to light a candle, and believes there is more to Wonder Bread than meets the eye, says, "Thank you."