

Stewards of Grace

1 Peter 4:7-10

Reformation Sunday/ 31st October 2021

It's one of those years when Halloween and Reformation Sunday fall on the same day. Halloween and Reformation Day are always the same day, every year, October 31. But Reformation Day doesn't always fall on a Sunday. One of my friends and colleagues invited her congregation to come to worship today in costume, dressed as your favorite dead reformer. Luther is, of course, the reformer most associated with the day. As we know, on the 31st October 1517, Dr. Luther (1483-1546) posted 95 theses or reasons why the sale of indulgences to release the souls of loved ones from purgatory was, theologically, really problematic. We are saved, a soul is saved not through works or human effort (like buying one's way into heaven or even trying to be good), but by grace—grace as sheer gift. Unearned. Freely given. The grace of God made real in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Sola gratia*. Grace alone.

The sale of indulgences might have sparked the Reformation, but it didn't cause it. And the sale of indulgences did not cause the Church to split. The Church needed correction and reformation for some time.¹ It was Martin Luther's so-called "rediscovery of the gospel," rooted in grace and faith, that paved the way for protest and eventually reformed the Church and revolutionized the world.² Luther and his followers, the Lutherans, brought about substantial change in European Christianity. Decades later, John Calvin (1509-1564) and those within his circle of reformers, first in France and then in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scotland, were in many respects even more radical, bringing about systemic change in the Church but also society and culture. And the Anabaptists were even more radical in their reform of the Church. Calvin and his associates were not Lutherans, and they weren't, technically, Calvinists, they understood themselves as part of a theological tradition that came to be known as Reformed. And it's within the Reformed tradition that we, as Presbyterians, are situated—through John Knox (d.1572), who brought Reformed ideas to Scotland—along with our cousins the Congregationalists and other denominations, such as the Reformed Church in America (formerly the Dutch Reformed Church, the oldest Protestant denomination in the United States). It was centuries later that the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) proposed this mantra for us: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. We are the church reformed and always being reformed—not for the sake of reform, change, innovation, or the need to be relevant in the eyes of the culture, but reformed according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

It's easy to view the Reformation as essentially an intellectual affair, wrestling with theological and philosophical ideas. The reformers were indeed intellectually gifted. They had magnificent minds. Luther had a doctorate in theology. Calvin didn't have a doctorate in theology, but he was a brilliant theologian with a great mind and was probably a better theologian. Doctrine mattered to them; it matters to the Church—doctrine, theological engagement should matter to us. However, doctrine, theology, was never just about ideas or the life of the mind. Theology can reform the heart; it can change our lives and transform the world—and I believe this with all my heart. Not theological ideas, *per se*, but participation in that toward which theology points—toward the life of God in Christ, toward the life of the Spirit,

to the power of grace to form, reform, and transform our lives. When our lives participate in Christ through the life of the Christ, something happens in us, and the world is changed.

Yes, the reformers knew that grace is a gift. It cannot be earned. But they also knew that with grace, with the reception of this gift, comes enormous responsibility. We have a responsibility to be stewards, *good* stewards of all that has been given to us. This approach or response to grace allowed the Reformation to have a widespread impact upon European culture, eventually reaching these shores. When we know how much has been given to us by God's grace, that grace generates a life of gratitude and ultimately service to the giver of the gift. With gratitude, we serve the Lord and serve with joy and love, bearing witness with our lives to the manifold, varied ways we have experienced God's grace.

As a result, the Reformation brought about radical reform at every level of the Church and society. Daily prayer and worship and regular singing of the Psalms were common for everyone, not just the clergy. The Lord's Supper was celebrated often (Calvin wanted Communion celebrated weekly, on every Lord's Day), with the entire congregation sharing in the meal, not only priests. The Reformation shaped the political structure of the Church and society, redistributing power and authority through the "priesthood of all believers." The gospel must be embodied in the lives of God's people in acts of mercy and justice. Geneva became known as the "City of Refuge" as it welcomed religious refugees, thousands, fleeing persecution in France. The deacons stood at the gates of Geneva to receive new arrivals. If you go to the oldest part of the city, near where Calvin lived, you will see medieval townhouses four and five stories high. Look closely and you will see that the top levels are in a different style because they were added later. To accommodate the influx of refugees, Genevans constructed additional rooms were on top of older buildings. The Reformation shaped the rise of capitalism and brought about enormous wealth for the Protestant countries of Europe. The Reformation also shaped the rise of socialism and other reform movements in Europe and later the United States. It had an enormous impact on education. Literacy rates soared in the sixteenth century because people wanted to read scripture in their native tongue. This led to an increase in critical thinking and the founding of public schools and universities. It shaped the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and later the industrial revolution that followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Reformation shaped the arts, music, and literature. And, yes, there was a shadow side to all of this. The Reformation did not usher in the Kingdom of God. Division, fragmentation of Church and society, and countless wars over religion followed in its wake. My point here is this: the Reformation was not just a theological "thing," an academic affair. It was ultimately a matter of the heart—hearts alive by grace and with gratitude becoming stewards of all that had been given to them.

And this was not something they came up with on their own. It's embedded in the Christian life. It's right here in 1 Peter: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." Or, as the English Standard Version has it: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." It's not a question of whether we have received gifts from God. There is no doubt, we have received gifts. They are given for us to use, not saved or hoarded away. These gifts don't belong to us. We are called to be stewards, caretakers, managers, making sure that the gifts are

being shared, used, multiplied, blessing others, blessing the world. Because when we are good stewards of these gifts, God is glorified through us, glorified in us, transforming the world.

I invite you to meditate and pray on this one verse, [1 Peter 4:10](#). Allow it to seep into your heart and soul. We will hear it often over the next month as it's the theme for this year's stewardship season. Stewardship is always in season, of course, but we will be highlighting the centrality of stewardship in the Christian life as we lead up to Pledge Commitment Sunday on November 21.

I invite you to reflect upon the past nineteen months through the pandemic. We have been tried and tested in many ways. Perhaps more than ever, we are conscious of what we have and who we are, what has been entrusted to us, what is valuable and precious to us (and what is not), and how we want to live and serve and use the gift of the days God has given to us. I'm minded of Rev. Ames' words to his son in Marilynne Robinson's beautiful novel *Gilead*, "There is more beauty [in this world] than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm."³ And this requires that we be brave and courageous.

We are stewards of manifold grace. Much has been placed into our hands. Something precious, valuable, powerful, beautiful has been placed into our hands. With the gift comes the obligation. We have the gracious responsibility and burden to be good stewards of all that has been given to us. We are called to share our gifts generously in service to one another in the life of the Church. We have an obligation to this community, to God's people, to the people here, to their care and well-being, nurture and growth, a ministry of comfort, challenge, and consolation, to hold and be held. It's an obligation, a responsibility to be a good steward. But it's also joy. There is a sublime joy that comes with using, sharing, celebrating what God has given us. It's the joy that comes with service. The joy that comes with serving God. The joy that comes with placing your life into service to something, someone other, larger than yourself. To serve the common good. To seek the good of the other. It is the joy that comes with and through love, loving one another.

Grace and gratitude. Stewards of grace. This is the holy way that shapes our lives. These are the marks of a vital and healthy life of faith. These are marks of a vital and healthy church. When we are stewards of what has been placed into our hands, when we use and share our gifts generously in service to one another through the life of the church, the reformation—reformed and always reforming—continues through you and me.



Jean Perrissin, *Le Temple de Paradis* (1565), Reformed Church of Lyons, France.
From the International Museum of the Reformation, Geneva, Switzerland.

¹ For an excellent history of this period, I recommend Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (Penguin Book, 2005), as well as *All Things Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

² For a description of Luther's development and theological breakthrough, see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1950), 45-51. Luther's "rediscovery" is also known as this "tower experience," which took place in 1519. He later recalled, "These words 'righteous' and 'righteousness of God' struck my conscience as flashes of lightning, frightening me each time I heard them: if God is righteous, he punishes. But by the grace of God, as I once meditated upon these words in the tower: 'The righteous shall live by faith' and 'the righteousness of God,' there suddenly came into my mind the thought that if we as righteous are to live by faith, and if the righteousness of faith is to be for salvation to everyone who believes, then it is not our merit, but the mercy of God. Thus my soul was refreshed, for it was the righteousness of God by which we are justified and saved through Christ. These words became more pleasant to me. Through this word the Holy Spirit enlightened me in the tower."

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel* (New York: Picado, 2006), 246.