

*From the Pastor's Desk:*  
*A Sermon for Sunday, October 30, 2022 - Reformation Sunday*

Today is Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday is an interesting church day, because it isn't universally celebrated by all Christians. Orthodox and Catholic Christians alike have no need for this day. Though, maybe that's a good thing? Like, if the Catholic celebrated the day we all left the Catholic Church, that could be really hurtful! It reminds me of that old joke that during the earliest colonialist days, England sent its prisoners to Australia and pushed the Puritans to America. And the jury is still out on who got the better deal! In fact, I can't prove this historically, but I think prior to these moves, the country was just called "Britain." That is, they didn't make Britain "Great" until after getting rid of their Puritans! (We gotta get Heather a small drum set so she can hit a rimshot on each of these zingers!)

Anyway, unlike World Communion Sunday a few weeks ago or All Saints Sunday next week, Reformation Sunday is a gift to the Protestant churches and, even more specifically, we Reformed Protestants. For example, today probably isn't a big deal amongst the United Methodists, as their theological tree grows its branches from a separate source than we Presbyterians.

For clarity, this day specifically commemorates Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This took place on October 31, 1517, so just about 505 years ago. This act, I should be clear, was not one of public destruction, but one of the common ways that communal concerns were raised and addressed. It was more an E-vite to a discussion than a revolutionary act of protest. That said, the conversation begun on that day did lead to the creation of us, "Protest"-ants.

Of course, after 505 years, it is reasonable to ask, "Who cares?" It isn't that origin stories aren't interesting – the Marvel Cinematic Universe has made literally billions of dollars off sub-par origin story movies for each of their top superheroes, after all – but we can't really claim that much of who we are today is still contained in those 95 Theses. The half-millennia path between then and now includes scores of other important contributors to the church and theology we now share. Indeed, Presbyterianism in America is probably more indebted to John Knox than Martin Luther. And our theology belongs almost exclusively to Karl Barth, who took Luther and Calvin and then blended them with Augustine and Aquinas – two pre-Reformation-split Catholic theologians – and then shakes that all up in a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century glass that was forged in the fires of rising Nazism. So, yeah, clearly we've continued to grow and evolve and we may have reached the point where we have to honestly ask – with no malice and no eye roll – "who cares?"

Well, this would be a blessedly short, albeit wholly unholy, sermon if we weren't supposed to care. Obviously, this liturgical day – unique as it is to our branch of Christian identity – is still meaningful for our general understanding of what it

means to call Jesus Christ, Lord, Savior, and Friend. And that's because this day invites us into an intentional relationship with our history so that we might best be able to discern God's will in the future. This day reminds us that our history also lives with us in the present in ways both known and unknown, both observed and unobserved. And when it comes to approaching our history – and this holds true for large-scale theological movements as well as our small-scale personal histories – we are presented different lenses through which to view and engage with history. Today, we'll discuss the difference between nostalgia and what Father Richard Rohr has called "inclusion and transcendence." That's right, I'm not able to preach this Reformation Sunday sermon without the help of a *Catholic* priest. Clearly, we're no longer in Luther's Protestantism!

Before we unpack this, though, I want us to recognize that not only is crafting a relationship to history a very human, very inevitable thing, it is also a holy task, as we witness in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In our first reading, Paul takes the well-known (at least amongst Jewish converts to Christ) story of the Exodus and rewrites it or reframes it in light of the Light of Christ. He does this in a quick, almost fan-fiction manner that can only be decoded if one is familiar with the Exodus story. For example, "our ancestors were all under the cloud" is a reference to Exodus 13 in which Yahweh provides a pillar of cloud to lead Israel during the day and then a pillar of fire to lead them at night. "Passed through the sea" is probably well known if only because Charleston Heston and early CGI-like graphics gave us that unforgettable scene of Moses parting the Red Sea. "Spiritual food" refers to heavenly manna, while "spiritual drink" refers to the water that came from a rock in order to quench Israel's thirst while they walked the desert for 40 years. Essentially, what Paul does is reframe history in light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you remember anything from today, I hope it's that idea, namely that our goal is to perpetually recall, recount, and reappraise history in light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And, again, this can/should be done with both large-scale historical movements and our own, small-scale personal and interpersonal histories. All of history – all of time – now resides under the One who was crucified, buried, and risen from the grave. All submits to the authority of His Lordship.

Of course, that's merely the ideal way – not the *only* way – to view history. And by the time Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, which was comprised of both Jewish and Gentile converts, the Jewish approach to the Exodus had become marred by the plague of nostalgia.

Now, this is the point in the sermon where I'm going to be critical of something – namely nostalgia – and so it's the point where I risk losing you a bit for the simple fact that no one wants to hear a pastor vent his spleen for five minutes. I know this. I'm aware. But a career in professional

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ministry has also taught me just how tempting nostalgia can be to us all and how debilitating it often proves to be for communities. So, to soften the blow a little, let me make clear that not *all* nostalgia is bad *all* of the time.

Nostalgia can be a really fun way to bond in the moment with others. For example, as you've probably all come to realize by now, I don't have a personality, per se, but rather am a big ball of compressed pop culture references from the 90s and early 2000s. Right? You've seen this. My whole personality is like the particle board that Ikea furniture is made out of. As such, if I have any ability to charm anyone in my generation, it comes exclusively through my quick recall of *Simpsons* and *SNL* references from our shared adolescence and young adult years. Is this substantive stuff? No, of course not. It's mostly talking out of my butt... like, literally, talking out of my butt like Jim Carrey did in *Ace Ventura Pet Detective* – a film that has grown sadly sour for its transphobia, but which is, nonetheless, an artifact of my childhood. So, yeah, even nostalgia in its best sense must be massaged and carefully re-encountered if it is to be useful.

In its worst sense, nostalgia neglects, ignores, or simply misses today's blessings from God as we fill our eyes, minds, and hearts with memories of before. In church settings like ours, this most often takes the form of remembering the "glory days" of the church when pews were full, budgets overflowed, and the church teemed with children who were – miracle of all miracles – always quiet during the pastor's sermon and never spent time sideways kicking their siblings during the prayers.

Nostalgia does its evil – and dare I say even demonic? – work by filling our eyes with the children who aren't here and causing us to neglect the ones who are. It remembers when there were twenty kids, not two – which, not for nothing, will inevitably make the two who are here feel inferior, for what one child can fill the role of ten children all by themselves? And nostalgia will look at our budget – which we'll be discussing more in the coming weeks – for the funds that *aren't* there instead of singing "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" for the great generosity that *does* exist. It is this eschewing of blessings in favor of obsessing about absence that leads me to wonder if nostalgia isn't, in the end, demonic.

And, just so were clear, this is a problem that has been plaguing the people of God since our inception, for no sooner does Paul get done discussing the Exodus narrative – that story for which all Israel was perpetually nostalgic – than he twists the knife and says "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness." Yikes! Paul knows that his Jewish audience, in particular, had a rose-tinted, nostalgic views of God's *past* work in the world and that this was clouding their vision for what God had done and was doing through Jesus the Christ. And

so, Paul goes on a demystifying spree in what follows.

You know, if our current popular media is at all representative of our collective psyche, we are living through a demystifying era of recent history. Podcasts like Malcolm Gladwell's *Revisionist History*, Slate's *Decoder Ring*, and, my favorite, *You're Wrong About* are all attempts to look at modern history – let's say from the 1950s to now – through non-nostalgic lenses. Or, on TV, Ryan Murphy's *American Crime Story* revisits the crimes of the 1990s – OJ Simpson, the assassination of Versace, and President Clinton's impeachment – hoping to help us view them anew.

Indeed, if anyone has benefitted the most from this, it is none other than Monica Lewinsky, who went from Jay Leno's favorite monologue punchline to budding feminist icon for the simple fact that with the benefits of time and consideration, we've come to realize that blaming a 26-year-old intern for the misdeeds of the leader of the free world is both unfair and unjust. We've come to understand, for example, that Leno committed the unforgivable comedic sin of punching down – that is, in making humor at the expense of someone who has no equivalent cultural power or authority. She was a 26-year-old intern. Intern! She didn't even get paid to get mocked!

Well, this revisioning of history is not only a contemporary trend but is the purpose behind an annual liturgical day like Reformation Sunday. On this day, we are invited to once again come back to our history and view it again. As we do so, we must avoid the evil of nostalgia, but we must also not be content to merely deconstruct. For this is the twin sin to nostalgia and if you wanted to map the political cartography of these two approaches, conservatives prefer nostalgia – for what does "Make America Great *Again*" mean without the presumption of nostalgia? – while liberals prefer deconstruction, the breaking down of history in order to see all of its foibles, flaws, and sins. The former is wish-dream thinking, while the latter is merely anger and trauma bonding.

Thank God, then, for the aforementioned "inclusion and transcendence" offered us by Fr. Rohr, for it is this approach that best keeps us in touch with our history without enslaving us to it. And, indeed, I've maybe already offered a small example of what "inclusion and transcendence" means in my earlier reference to *Ace Ventura Pet Detective*. For the entire resolution of that film's conflict comes through the defaming and belittling of a trans character. And while this was socially acceptable in the 1990s, we know better now. What I tried to model by owning this comedic film's influence on my childhood, while still acknowledging that its transphobia has no place in my current life, is precisely what "inclusion and transcendence" is meant to do. It is to be honest enough to include that which did occur, while simultaneously demonstrating a God-led

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transcendence past the worst parts of that history. By comparison, the conservative-nostalgic view just gets irritated and says “quit being a snowflake,” while the liberal-deconstructionist view lamely attempts to excise that influence from my history. Of course, history is so replete with sins that anyone who truly commits to deconstruction will soon find themselves with no history at all. And we all need a history.

So, that's the work we're invited into on Reformation Sunday. That's the work we see Jesus do when folks bring Him headlines ripped straight from the *Jerusalem Times* and asks Him to opine. This day and that story are instructions on *how* to approach our history. It is to remember that these events are part of us – the good, the bad, and the ugly alike – while also coming to realize the ways God has helped grow us. (Or, if we haven't grown, to help us better see the ways we yearn for God to grow us). It is to view history through the lens of Jesus' resurrection, which forever transforms time. It is to remember, as the Reformation taught us, that as the People of God we are *reformanda semper reformata* – that is, we are reformed and always reforming.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.