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Enliven the Spirit of Reformation¹

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The 50th Anniversary of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church last Sunday was a wonderful celebration. Nevertheless, we cannot stay there. We have to move on. Like many other important events in the past, fabulous as they may have been, we cannot be there any longer. We need to face the future.

Today is the first Sunday of the next fifty years of our church. It is Reformation Sunday. We commemorate the courageous act of Martin Luther posting his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. That act eventually ignited the Reformation movement. In my hand is *The Book of Concord* which is the theological statements and declarations of the early Lutherans' understanding of Christianity. You also see here a volume of *Luther's Works*, which is a collection of Luther's writings in the sixteenth century. Over and over again I hear Lutherans quoting these books to find out how Lutherans should practice their faith. While we need these books to guide our thinking, I keep wondering what is the meaning of Reformation in our times, especially when Roman Catholics and Lutherans have signed the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" several years ago.² Citing Luther is common among Lutherans. Yet, if we are not careful, we almost turn Luther into a god. That may be one way to be a Lutheran; let me show you another way.

This other way is what I call the spirit of Reformation. What made Martin Luther a great reformer of the Church was his courage to critique established views of the time. Luther was an Augustinian monk and a professor of the Church. Through studying the Scriptures and theology he came to disagree with the Church on many fronts. The most notorious one was the sale of indulgences. The Roman Church guaranteed parishioners' salvation when they purchased church-issued papers. Luther relentlessly critiqued the powerful Church which was full of traditions and established practices.

Because of that Luther was judged a heretic by the Roman Church. It was the sixteenth century.

Now, after more than five hundred years, Lutheranism seems to have become a similar institution. Ironically, the Lutheran Church is so full of traditions that Lutherans are those who are afraid of new ideas. It is now our turn to greet those who critique established traditions as demonic. “Change” is a bad word among us. Yet, revisiting the courageous acts of Luther encourages us not to shy away from reforming the Church.

Luther was not afraid to critique the established teachings and traditions of the Church. To name a few: In a time when the Church said parishioners could receive only the host during Eucharist, Luther gave parishioners both the host and the cup. In a time when the Church said the liturgy and the Bible had to be conducted and printed in Latin, Luther did it in German. In a time when the Church said priests were not allowed to marry, Luther married. Luther further challenged the Church by writing hymns using German folk tunes – the music of the grassroots, the kind of music disapproved of at the time. Luther was not afraid to raise questions, to challenge the status quo, and to stand on the opposite side of the teachings of the time. In this he reflected Jesus’ earthly ministry. This is the legacy of Martin Luther, the spirit of Reformation, the DNA of Lutheranism.

God is not afraid of social change. *We are*. Contrary to common belief, change is always near the heart of Christianity. Let me give some examples. Some men today could be disappointed for not being born in ancient biblical times!

King David and King Solomon were revered as men of God, yet, who knows how many wives and concubines they had in their palace. In those days, it was commonly accepted that men have sex with slaves if their wives did not give them sons. Implicitly, women were second-class citizens. God did not say a word about that practice. Slavery was also assumed in the Bible.

Through reading the Bible and consultations with church officials during the Crusades, the Church regarded killing Muslims and Jews to be the holy duty of all Christians. During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews were spared from death if they converted to Christianity.

Not long ago in Canada, in order to assimilate the First Nations people into the colonial regime of the former century, Christian denominations teamed up with the government of Canada to set up

residential schools. The agents from the office of Indian Affairs were commissioned to seize any school-age children in the Reserve without parental consent and remove them to boarding schools miles away from their places of origin. Once they arrived at the schools, these children were told to burn the clothing they brought from the Reserve, renounce their family traditions and language. They were given Christian names and forced to adopt Christianity. These aboriginal children did not see their birth parents for long periods of time.

Canadians are proud of their democratic heritage. Yet, Canadians also condoned discriminatory treatment of the early Chinese immigrants who built the national railroad, and they interned thousands of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War.

With regard to women, Canadian women had no voting rights and were excluded from receiving higher education until the beginning of the twentieth century, and that only after a long political fight for change. Things have changed. God can live with these changes.

Since the beginning of Christianity, there has been no shortage of difficult issues facing the Church. Still, it is common to hear people lament the passing of the good old days. These lamentations display a sentiment that says the past is better than the present. But which former good old days are these people talking about? Do they mean polygamy should be accepted? Do they mean slavery is preferable? Do they mean killing Muslims and Jews is holy work? Do they mean apartheid is just? Do they mean interning Japanese-Canadians is fine? Do they mean women should have no voting rights? If they think so, let them return to those good old days. I'd rather give thanks to God for what we have today, although it is still a work in progress!

Should the Church keep its traditions? By all means! But which ones? God gives us hearts and minds to study, discuss, reflect, and make decisions. We just need to open the history of the Church and see the evolution of ideas, doctrines, and beliefs. For us who value the Bible highly, we need to learn not just how to interpret the Bible, but also the history of the interpretation of the Bible. Through that we will see how each generation has different opinions about the meaning of the Bible.

God does not change, as the Church quite rightly insists, but our understanding of this unchanging God changes. In fact, God is not afraid of change. If the great theologians of the past - such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl

Barth and Paul Tillich – were alive and sitting in one room, would they see eye to eye? Not a chance! These theologians had profound differences concerning what it means to follow Jesus.

How do we know which change is a good one? My short answer to this good question is this: It depends on whom you ask. Returning to the sixteenth century for a moment: To those who bear his name, and to many others, Luther was great reformer, a great theologian, and a man of faith and courage. But the Roman Church of the time wholeheartedly disagreed. To them, Luther was a heretic, the greatest deceiver of all times who broke the unity of the Church, diluted the faith of the saints, and departed from the traditions of the Church, leading many of his followers astray. Lutherans would be burned in the unquenchable fires of hell! The answer to the above-mentioned question depends on where you stand in the equation.

Reformation Sunday is not only about reciting the things of the past; it is also about empowering all Christians to take risks, to do justice, and to speak for the powerless. The history of the Church constantly shows courageous men and women inspired by the story of Jesus willing to challenge the status quo to a point of giving up their lives.

Reconstructing faith is at the centre of the Church's task. If Luther were alive and with us today, he would be disappointed to see us recycling his ideas generated in the sixteenth century and refusing to continue to reform the Church with critical eyes and minds. The biggest idolatry is to treat traditions as god. Don't get stuck! Enliven the spirit of Reformation! Keep reforming! Amen.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached on Reformation Sunday, 29 October 2006.
- ² The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* was signed at Augsburg, Germany, 31 October 1999, by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.