

Reformation Sunday – October 25, 2026

John 8: 31-36, Romans 3:19-28, Jeremiah 31:31-34

Pastor Chris Repp

Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I love Reformation Sunday. No, it's not the most important festival of the church year, and it's not even my favorite. In fact it's classified as a minor festival on our calendar, and as you might suspect not all Christians observe it. For our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers this is the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost. And there are even some Lutherans who think we maybe shouldn't make such a big deal about it anymore. But I love it for a couple of reasons. One is all the great music. We're singing some great hymns today, including our hymn of the day, a hymn that I'll say more about at the end of the sermon. We also have a really fun choral anthem, based on the tune of A Mighty Fortress that we just sang. The other reason I love Reformation Sunday is that it gives us an opportunity each year to remind ourselves what it means to be the church and why we do what we do, even if we don't always live up to our Reformation standards.

I want to pull from all three of our readings this morning in order to fulfill that latter task and then come back to our hymn of the day and why I think it's such a great hymn, especially for today. I know I have done that a few times before with you, but it's always worth repeating.

So first, in our Gospel reading from John, the Judean audience gathered around Jesus is so caught up in their identity as "children of Abraham" that they miss just what it was about Abraham that makes him someone to emulate. And so they also miss what God is doing in Jesus. I think there's an important lesson here for us Lutherans when we celebrate the Reformation. If you've been around the Lutheran church for a while, you know that we have had a tendency in the past to treat Reformation Sunday like a victory day celebration. "There was an epic battle and our side won. Hurray for us!" We are the heirs of the Reformation and Martin Luther. Our church has corrected the abuses and errors of the medieval church. We've gotten our act together and cleaned house. We believe in grace, not works. We trust God's word, not human traditions. We have the right number of sacraments. We allow our pastors to marry. And so on. In short, we have seen ourselves as the "right" church and others, not so much. And so we pat ourselves on the back and thank God that we're not like other people. And following the Pharisee who gave the same kind of thanks to God, we can miss the whole point that the Reformation was trying to return us to: namely that it is God who has acted and continues to act to make us who we are. If we are going to celebrate anything, let it be what God is working in us, right here and now in this assembly today, connecting us in faith to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which are right now setting us free from the powers of sin, death and evil. We are free not because we deserve to be, not because we were born into good Lutheran families, and not because we have worked to free ourselves, but because God is fully invested in the world God loves, and God will not give up on us even when we give up on God. Both Abraham and Martin Luther are prime examples of that dynamic. Both were flawed men, shaky at times in their faith, who struggled to trust God's promises. But both of them also came to know God's persistence, God's forgiveness, and God's ultimate faithfulness to them.

That, then, leads us to our second reading. Up to this point in his letter to the Romans, Paul has been working to show that Jews and Gentiles have actually been on parallel paths through history, whose proper destination is Jesus Christ. The children of Israel, from the Exodus to Paul's time had the law of Moses, given to them on Mt. Sinai. And they failed to keep that law. They couldn't even keep the first one – you shall have no other gods. The Gentiles, Paul argued, also had God's law, but for them it was "written on their hearts." What he means by that

is that they knew by instinct what was right and what was wrong. They knew that it was wrong to kill, steal, lie, and so on. They knew that it was right to honor their parents and respect and love God. But just like the descendants of Abraham, they too failed to keep that law. So, says Paul, you see that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and both need to be rescued by God from their hopeless plight. And that is just what happens in Jesus’ work of redemption on the cross.

I think that we can take this same idea and apply it to Lutherans and Catholics, and really to all of the other separate groups that formed at the time of the Reformation and since. To be sure, the Catholic church is still in need of reform. But what we have often failed to appreciate is that already in the sixteenth century they did in fact make some of Luther’s suggested reforms, even as they rejected the core of his theology. Ecumenical and scholarly work since the Second Vatican Council has shown us that, as often happens in heated conflicts, the various sides of the debate in Luther’s day were sometimes talking past each other, not always understanding what they ended up rejecting. And in 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the historic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Just as importantly, though, we Lutherans have often forgotten that reform is an ongoing need of our own church bodies. The Lutheran church that emerged from the Reformation battles was far from perfect. It had a problematic relation to the state. It treated minority religious groups on its own territory as badly as the Catholic church had treated them. And there were other issues. So you see, Reformation Sunday cannot be a day for looking down our noses at the Catholic Church or any other church body. It has to be a day to have a good look in the mirror to see where we ourselves have fallen short of the glory of God, and then to celebrate not our own achievements but God’s continuing grace and mercy to us and through us, in spite of our failure.

That, then, leads us to our first reading from Jeremiah and my third point. Our awareness both of our own sinfulness and the good news of God’s persistent love and forgiveness has the effect of opening our hearts to God and to one another by the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s what the vision of Jeremiah is pointing to, to the days when not only God’s law but also God’s gospel is written on our hearts, so that our hearts are changed, our values realigned, and we finally love God with our whole heart, wanting what God wants, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That day is coming, we are bold to claim with Jeremiah, because God is doing a new thing in us right now through God’s promises of forgiveness and life in Jesus, promise made to us in word and sacrament, the means by which God’s grace operates.

These three Reformation readings, the readings we have every year, work together to communicate to us the heart of the Christian faith and the point of the Reformation that Martin Luther set in motion 509 years ago this week. And our hymn of the day that is coming up now is a brilliant summary of these readings and the good news they convey: God comes to us in Jesus, enters our human story with grace and forgiveness as an answer to our sin, with light as an answer to our darkness, with life as an answer to our death. And then God enlists us in God’s own mission, to hurl our songs and prayers against the darkness, to convey in word and deed God’s story that God has joined to our own, and by that story and its promises to herald the new creation that is coming to pass.

That is what we celebrate today. Let us do so with humility. Let us do so with joy. And let us do so with conviction. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.