



REFORMATION SUNDAY, preached at St. Ignatius Loyola Roman Catholic Church

October 29, 2017, The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 22: 34-40

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Theme: Protestants and Roman Catholics share much more than what separates us.

What an honor to stand in this pulpit today. What an honor it is for my congregation, the Brick Presbyterian Church on Park Avenue at 91st Street, to welcome your Pastor to our pulpit today. Thank you for this double opportunity. Would you pray with me?

The Lord be with you... Honestly God, we do want to love our neighbors, at least most of the time. Illumine our path this morning and always by the light of Your word to us in Scripture. Show us the way and then strengthen us to walk in it. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Five hundred years ago the day after tomorrow, the 31st of October, 1517, marks the official beginning date of the Protestant Reformation. On that day, tradition has it that a young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a list of theological questions to the door of a nearby church. They came to be called the “95 Theses.” Luther didn’t want to break from Rome. Luther didn’t want to start a new denomination. He wanted to talk things through. But it didn’t work out that way. People on both sides, Luther included, soon retreated to their theological corners. Positions hardened and within a few years the unity of the Western Church was shattered. Europe was tragically divided between Protestant and Catholic. Protestantism itself soon splintered into diverse denominations. My Presbyterian tradition is but one of a great variety of Protestant flavors.



We Protestants have long marked the Sunday immediately *before* October 31st as “Reformation Sunday.” That’s today. For half a millennium, Reformation Sunday has celebrated Protestant theology and history. Candidly, it’s often been an occasion for more than a little Protestant pride and primping. So the fact that on Reformation Sunday your Pastor, my friend Dennis Yesalonia, is standing in my pulpit at Brick Church a few blocks up Park Avenue, is big deal. The fact that I’m standing in this Roman Catholic pulpit on Reformation Sunday is a big deal. The fact that Timothy Cardinal Dolan is preaching at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church this morning is a big deal. We’ve come a long way. None of this would have happened on the 400th or even the 450th Anniversaries of the Reformation.

The initial issue that split us apart half a millennium ago was what’s called the doctrine of justification. It’s complicated, but to oversimplify, the disagreement was about what reconciles us to God – faith or good works? The water was muddied by the late Medieval Church’s practice of selling indulgences. Luther said God loves us just because God loves us; you can’t buy it, indeed we don’t have to do a thing except trust it – that’s faith. Catholic theology at the time emphasized what you need to do in this life to be right with God – that’s good works.

500 years later, I’ve got some happy news for you. A few years ago, representatives of the Vatican and the World Lutheran Federation representing Protestants signed a document called “The Joint Declaration.” The Joint Declaration stated that Roman Catholics and Protestant followers of Luther are now in essential agreement on the justification question that divided us 500 years ago. Here’s a key sentence from that document: *“Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”* Half a millennium after Luther made his list, the original issue dividing Catholics and Protestants was basically resolved.



Brothers and sisters in Christ, I stand before you this 500th Reformation Sunday to affirm three simple but crucially important things:

First, the Christian faith which you and I, Roman Catholics and Protestants, share - all the beliefs and practices we have in common - are so much more important than the fewer matters that still separate us. I often make this point with a hand gesture. I make a little circle with the thumb and pointer finger of each hand. I say that this circle is what Protestants believe, and this one is what Catholics believe. Then I place one over the other and say, *“The two circles overlap about 90 percent.”*

Like you, I believe in the centrality and divinity of Jesus Christ. Like you, I believe in the Holy Trinity - God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Like you, I believe in the divine authority of Holy Scripture. Like you, I say the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds. Like you, I believe that God has called the church into being as the community of the faithful. Like you, I believe that Holy Baptism is the door into this community of faith that is the church. Like you, I believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. That’s just a bit of the 90 percent.

But in fairness, I do have to name some of the 10 percent. Protestant that I am, I believe that the church is not essentially hierarchical and should be governed from the bottom up and democratically. I believe in the priesthood of all believers. I believe that clergy should be permitted to marry. (My wife is very happy about this one, at least I *think* she is.) These differences are not trivial, but my point is that these separating issues are far fewer and of less importance than all we affirm in common.

Second simple point. My faith was not founded 500 years ago by Martin Luther. It was established 2,000 years ago. My faith-family tree includes all those



Christians who came along between Jesus and St. Paul and the 16th Century Reformers. I honor the Christian sages who thought and wrote and struggled in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Our Men's Bible Study at Brick Church just finished reading Augustine's *Confessions*. There's a lovely chapel in our church with dozens of names of saints inscribed around its walls, and they're not just Protestant names. St. Augustine, Catholic Bishop of Hippo, is there. The Benedictine abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, is there. St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, is there. Even the hotheaded Dominican preacher Savonarola is there. All those Catholic names are on our Chapel wall. So my second simple point is that you and I share most of the same Christian family tree.

One last simple and very happy point. We are learning from each other. Protestants are looking at what Roman Catholics do well, and saying, "*Not a bad idea!*" So we Protestants have rediscovered the discipline of the lectionary, which prescribes Sunday, and daily Scripture readings. We Protestants are re-emphasizing the Sacraments in our worship life. We Protestants are reading the writings of medieval Roman Catholic mystics like Hildegard of Bingen. This morning at Brick Church, our choir is singing an anthem by the Roman Catholic composer Anton Bruckner – in Latin!

And you are borrowing from us. We processed into church this morning singing "*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.*" That hymn was written by none other than Martin Luther; indeed, it became the great hymn of the Reformation even though there's nothing particularly Protestant about its words. Your pastor told me this last week that he studied preaching at a Protestant seminary. This learning-from-each-other movement is often called "ecumenical convergence." That term notes the happy truth that we're moving closer together, not farther apart.

The Gospel lesson that I read is the same passage from Matthew that's being read this morning at the Brick Church seven blocks up the street. In these verses, Jesus is approached by a group of Pharisees. One of them, a lawyer, a scholar of Jewish



Law, asks Jesus which of the six-hundred-plus rules in that Law was the greatest. Jesus answers by quoting two passages from Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. First, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”* You and I - Catholic and Protestant - are *both* trying our very best to do just that. Then Jesus said, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* He did not say, love only your Jewish neighbor. He did not say love only your Catholic neighbor. He did not say love only your Protestant neighbor. He said *“Love your neighbor.”* So dear neighbors of St. Ignatius: We so respect you. We honor you. Indeed, we love you.

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