

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 October 29, 2017
 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:34-46
 "The Compassionate Life"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Even though I knew about the Reformation and knew this was the anniversary year, honestly I hadn't thought much about it – until I read an article written by The Rev. Traci Blackmon, the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries Executive and Senior Pastor of Christ the King UCC in Florissant, Missouri. Especially after her presence in Charlottesville, I've tried to read her articles as they were published – she's an impressive and thoughtful and challenging woman indeed.

She writes, "On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk, wrote a letter to his superiors in which he denounced the sale of indulgences and asked for repayment and removal of the misunderstandings. With this letter he included 95 Theses, 95 radical questions expressing his growing concerns with the corruption within the church and called for a complete reform of the Catholic church. He nailed these 95 Theses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenberg. The Catholic Church found Martin Luther's act to be so radical and non-conforming that he was eventually excommunicated, ushering in what has become known as the Protestant Reformation.

In Luther's time his rejection of religious dogma was seen by some as confrontational and by others as courageous. What can't be argued, though, is the fact of the precedence of such a bold act: Jesus himself had come to challenge the religious dogma of his day and one result of his challenge was the formation of the early church."

The church is not and cannot be static, though, can it. Even though the mission of the church remains the same, firmly grounded in Jesus' teachings the way we live out our mission has to continue to develop. The Reformation continues, doesn't it.

So, back to basics: what is the church? A community, a visionary community of the people of God. It's not the building but the gathered people – we know that. But visionary? We are people called together in a common purpose by God, a mission, if you will, that is much bigger than any one local congregation or one denomination or any other term we might use to describe what we think of as church. We said it this morning in our baptismal liturgy: we welcome you into the church, the Body of Christ. And what is our mission? We heard that in today's gospel reading – the Great Commandment – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. We are gathered here for one purpose: to foster, to increase the love of God and love of neighbor, not only here on Sunday mornings but every day of our lives. We, you and I, are Christ's body in the world, each of us created in God's own image. And, we have the great Commission in the gospel of Matthew, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all I have

commanded you. And we also have the promise: we're not in this alone. Jesus says, "I am with you always until the end of time." That's the vision!

The mission of the church: to Love God. To love our neighbor as ourselves. Sound simple, doesn't it. But we all know better.

What comes first? To Love God! All of us here I hope at some time in our lives have experienced the joy of God's love. That's not to say we don't wonder, perhaps get angry with God. As I held a comatose baby I wondered. As I sat with a woman, sick and tortured by pain, I wondered. When a child was killed in a horrible accident, I wondered. And who doesn't get angry when we see pictures of terrible suffering – in refugee camps, these days in Puerto Rico, in the inner city, anywhere. What triggers this anger in you? The psalmists teach us volumes about being angry with God – but they always end their laments, their cries, with praise – a knowledge that God is in their lives. Someone asked me once how I could explain a tragedy that had taken place – I couldn't. All I knew then and now, is that God is present to us. The answers are sometimes God's alone. What I do know is that nothing can separate us from God's love for us.

If the church is gathered to foster, to encourage that love of God, how do we express our thanksgiving for that love?

The mission of the church includes celebrating – we celebrate in thanksgiving in the sacrament of communion. At the Table Christ feeds us and sends us away from the Table to witness in the world. And we celebrate through the sacrament of baptism – we become at that moment members of the Body of Christ. We welcomed Joseph into our community with all the responsibility and joy that comes with that. Our worship is celebration!

Our mission also is to tell – tell the Story, share our faith. Certainly the educational program in any church is a part of that but so is every committee meeting, every fundraiser, every fellowship hour, every activity of the gathered community. Again, in our baptism, we promised to share our experience of our faith. Once we've experienced the love of God, we can give it away. And it's a never ending fountain – the more we give away of that love, the more we will experience it.

We celebrate. We tell. We also have a life in the Spirit, a being together. Fellowship. Koinonia. A co-existence that accepts all people just as God accepts us. The rejects of the ancient world: slaves, women, widows, orphans, the poor, the weak, infants, old people – Jesus drew all of these in and calls us to do the same. All those who were nobodies became somebodies. We still have rejects today – I leave it to you to fill in the categories – but the church is called to be what it is – the Body of Christ. That they, we, may all be one.

Another step in the mission of the church: doing. Always and everywhere the church is called to live out the love that cares for the most basic needs of human beings – serving each other. And I think serving is more than what we ordinarily think of – one of the most profound ways of serving is simply "being" with another person. Sometimes I think that presence, listening, being with, is the most valuable gift we can offer to another human being. A gift of ourselves. Of our time and energy. It's my spirit reaching out and touching your spirit – we may not even need words. Just presence. For me, being on the receiving end of that kind of "doing" has brought breathtaking glimpses of the presence of God. I knew God was with us. I just knew it. And I wanted to share it.

The nature and the mission of the church: Celebrating. Telling. Being. Doing. Each one of these points to the Great Commandment, doesn't it. Love God. Love neighbor. Through preaching and teaching we tell the Story. Through servanthood both within and outside in the wider community we DO the Story. In our life together, we ARE the story. We model that story for our children and for those who are hungry for fellowship. And in our worship, we CELEBRATE the story.

Those of us here this morning are committed to the life of this church – I invite each of us to spend some time wondering that that means in light of the Great Commandment. What do I believe about God? Jesus? The Holy Spirit? The Church. Step back and reflect on where God's love has touched us deep within our being, as individuals and corporately in this place.

And, friends, stewardship of our time, talents, and our bounty is part of that process. It's part of the celebration, the telling, the being, and the doing. It isn't just money – though that's a necessity in our life together. But it's also participation – serving as liturgist, hosting a fellowship hour, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, belonging on a committee, praying for and with our neighbors, bringing food for the Food Bank, it's gathering in worship on Sunday mornings. The list goes on. What does our faith mean to us? How do we express our faith? How do we manifest love of God and neighbor? How do we use the gifts of the Spirit God has so freely given?

500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church in Germany. And so the Reformation was born. But that Reformation continues today! Nothing remains static, does it – if it does, it dies.

Traci Blackmon continues in her article, "Churches are not buildings or institutions. The Church is a living organism that is both affected and infected by human proclivities. We, as the church, are influenced by culture and context. We often institute codes of conduct and ways of being crafted to facilitate our living in community together, but sometimes those ways of being become barriers in the community we seek to create. The United Church of Christ identifies itself with this tradition and also recognizes that the church is yet reforming.

We, like all communities that become institutionalized, may not always adapt to our changing context. Perhaps there are ways of being, ways of serving, ways of discipleship that need reforming. Living organisms grow and living organisms change in order to thrive in a changing world. The message of the church remains the gospel, but perhaps some of our delivery systems need an upgrade. In our case, yes we must be willing to reform the institution yet we must also be willing to consider that reformation is also a call to reform ourselves. We are the church. We are that living organism."

She charges all of us: "In honor of the Reformation, we invite you to develop your own version of the 95 Theses by sharing your thoughts of one way the church needs to change, move, act, or be to continue reforming today."

What would we include on the 95 Theses we nail to our doors? What do we need to re-form right here at St. Paul's to meet our future with hope and vitality?

Traci Blackmon has asked some good questions: are there ways of being that have become barriers in the community we seek to create? What ways of being, ways of serving, ways of discipleship need reforming? Which of our delivery systems need an upgrade?

I firmly believe this is a good time to be church – the world is hungry for good news, for hope, for acceptance, for a faith that will sustain through all the fear, chaos, and uncertainty we all face in one way or another.

Friends, today is a good day for Reformation. Where do we start?