

In the chapel on the campus of my Lutheran college, one of the stained glass windows was called “The Reformation Window”; it was a window dedicated to Lutheran history and heritage and populated by characters like Martin Luther, after whom the Lutheran Church is named; Philip Melancthon, the author of early Lutheran doctrines and documents; and J.S. Bach, the composer who took the doctrines of Lutheran faith and set them to music for choir, organ, and other instruments.

In Western history, “the Reformation” refers to the 16<sup>th</sup> century movement begun within the Roman Catholic Church which had far-reaching implications for the whole of European society. Its main actor was Martin Luther, who called the church to accountability, hoping to reform its excesses and return it to its roots in Holy Scripture and in Jesus. When we say, “the Reformation,” we’re talking about this historical event.

But today, I want to think together about “Reformation” as not just this significant moment in human history but also as an ongoing process in the life of the church. Let’s start with a definition: “Reformation” is a noun meaning “the act of reforming” or “the state of being reformed.” Hmm, that doesn’t help very much; did the dictionary miss that day in fourth grade when we learned the rule that you can’t define a word using part of that word?

So what is “the act of reforming”? What does “reform” mean? As a VERB, “reform” means “to make better morally or by removing abuses; to persuade or educate from a sinful to a moral life; or to put an end to malpractice or abuse.” As a NOUN, a “reform” is “a correction or improvement of social or personal evils or errors.” As either a verb or a noun, “reform” can also mean, literally, to re-form—or to reshape or remold. From this perspective, “reformation” is the process or act of reshaping or remolding or re-forming; in the case of “The Reformation,” it’s the process of re-forming the church.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther was attempting to re-form the church of his day from an institution which had been corrupted by human power concentrated into the hands and pockets of a few into a community which reflected the gospel of God’s grace equally to everyone. What concerned Luther most was that the gospel of grace—the good news of God’s love for all people—was threatened by the practices of the church, which had turned God’s love into a commodity for only those who could afford to buy it or who were good enough to earn it.

As he read St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, Luther resolved to re-form the church so that it no longer impeded the spread of God’s grace. In Romans 3, in today’s second lesson, Luther read: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” Hear that astounding news, that good gospel, again: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” Nothing, Luther concluded, should be put in the way of God’s grace.

Through his study of Scripture, Luther learned that grace was a free gift of God for God’s people, a gift that they didn’t have to—and couldn’t—earn or buy. But the church of his day had erected many barriers to grace. Instead of worshipping in their own language, people had to learn Latin liturgical phrases by rote. Instead of reading Scripture for themselves, they were spoon-fed interpretations by the

priests. Instead of hearing a gospel of God's grace poured out freely upon all people, they were bamboozled into thinking they could buy their own salvation or that of a deceased relative by purchasing indulgences. Luther attempted to correct these practices, but the abuses in the Roman Catholic Church were so ingrained and pervasive--and the hierarchy so powerful—that, eventually, Luther's followers decided to leave the church and found a new church, which they named after Luther, much to his chagrin.

Luther's followers reformed the church. They re-formed it. But they didn't "finish" the Reformation. The church is always in need of re-formation, an ongoing process of re-shaping the church, of molding the church for the sake of needed correction, of fashioning it anew for each new generation and each new context. Since the followers of Luther split from the Roman Catholic Church, the church has been reformed over and over again. The Roman Catholic Church itself has re-formed so that it no longer looks like the church of Luther's day. And in our own ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the church has been re-shaped, re-fashioned, and re-formed in many ways. Here are a few examples.

First, our ethnic composition. When Lutherans first came to North America four centuries ago, they gathered in their own ethnic enclaves, so that individual congregations served only Germans or Swedes, Norwegians or Finns, Danes or Slovaks. Today, ELCA churches are home not only to northern Europeans but also to Palestinians and Mexicans and Chinese and Tanzanians; our own congregation now includes not only members of German heritage, but also those of Jamaican and Egyptian and African and Italian and Puerto Rican and Native American descent. Our ELCA has been re-formed beyond its German-Scandinavian roots to include people of all nations and languages.

Next, our affiliation. The European Lutherans who settled in the Americas eventually formed networks called "synods," from a Greek word that means "path together" or "walking together." They eventually created an alphabet soup of synods: ULCA, ALC, USS, AELC, LCA, UNLC, JSO; King of Kings was born into the ULCA (United Lutheran Church in America) and, by mergers, entered the LCA (Lutheran Church in America) and then the ELCA. Since 1988, the ELCA itself has been re-formed, as some congregations have left to form yet more Lutheran synods, most commonly because they disagreed either with a decision to establish full communion with the Episcopal Church or with a decision to allow ordination of gay and lesbian candidates for pastoral ministry. Our synod structures are re-formed to meet the needs of the church as society changes.

Other reformations in Lutheran churches in the U.S. include: a move from quarterly or monthly communion to weekly communion; first communion offered in early elementary years (when it had previously required confirmation before communion); the opening of church properties for community use; and the ordination of women. The Reformation, begun in 1517 when Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door, continues even today in the ELCA—and at King of Kings! For 62 years, this congregation been re-shaped, re-fashioned, and re-formed in order to convey the gospel, the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, to the world. Can you think of some ways that King of Kings has been reformed and reshaped?

I think of the physical plant. At its founding in 1962, King of Kings worshipped on the second floor of the New Windsor Ambulance Corps building. Carole Miller had to climb the fire escape in her wedding dress to go down the aisle to marry Wayne; you can see this historical event represented in our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary banner in the narthex; ask me about it after worship! In 1968 ground was broken on this plot of land where we are worshipping today; the original building included the areas we now know

as the offices, bathrooms, nursery, and sacristy. In 1996 the kitchen and Fellowship Hall were constructed, and in 2006 the sanctuary was expanded and the Rear Fellowship Hall and classrooms were added. King of Kings' physical plant has been re-formed several times in our history.

I think also of customs. Hymnals, for one; before we had our current all-inclusive bulletin, our hymnals were, in order: red, green, folk, and blue, and our bulletins are based on the latest ELCA hymnal, cranberry in color. Instruments have also changed: initially piano, then organ, guitars, flute and sax and strings, and now rhythm instruments as well. While only the Altar Guild and the pastor were allowed into the chancel in 1962, we now meet inside the communion railing around the communion table when a small group is celebrating the Eucharist. Today, lay people read the lessons, lead the prayers, and assist with distributing communion, all jobs that were formerly reserved for the clergy. While the original council of King of Kings was all men, our 2024 council includes male, female and non-binary members. And twenty-five years ago, we experienced a reformation when Intern Patt Margolis (now Kauffman) stepped up to the pulpit as the first woman to preach at King of Kings. Customs at King of Kings have been re-forming throughout our six decades.

Ministry at King of Kings hasn't remained static, either. While we still gather for worship and education and receive pastoral care from one another and reach out into our community as our forebears did in 1962, there have been lots of reforms since then. Worship times—and even days have changed! A Thursday Evening Prayer service was added in 2007; that now moves to Wednesdays during the summer to accommodate the New Windsor Craft Table. In 2015 we moved from two Sunday services to one on Saturday and one on Sunday. Some of you remember ministries of King of Kings that have ceased: a quilting group, a pre-school, a week of respite for New York City kids in the summer, LCW (that was Lutheran Church Women) and WELCA (Women of the ELCA), Women's Circles, Men's Bible Study, Luther League, LYO (Lutheran Youth Organization), Mission Builders, Family Promise, Sunday School, Game Night, and my least favorite—anyone remember what that was? Pairs and Spares, for single and coupled members! And we have ministries today that weren't part of our ministry in 1962: Habitat for Humanity, Thanksgiving Baskets, Christmas Joy, Easter Joy, and Young at Hearts. Other ministries have been added in the past several years: Book Club, BING (**B**ible **I**ntergenerational **G**athering), ABC (Arts Bible Camp), and the community Holiday Meal on December 25. Ministry at King of Kings is constantly re-forming.

What reformation is next for King of Kings? What needs to change today in order to make the gospel known in this congregation and this neighborhood? How will Abby bring changes into our community as she enters into adult membership at King of Kings? Maybe you have noticed something that needs to be re-formed at King of Kings; talk to any council member, and you can be part of our next reformation!

Reformation happens not only in the wider church and in congregations and in specific ministries; it also happens for each of us. What has God re-formed in your life, my friend? How has the Holy Spirit worked in your life to reshape you, to refashion you? How do you still need to be reformed?

Each of us has areas of life that are in need of reform. Perhaps it's your financial life that needs a makeover. Perhaps it's creating a habit of exercise. Maybe it's your family life, in need of more attention. Maybe it's your working life, taking too much time or too much energy. Maybe it's your future, working on getting your driver's license or writing your college applications or starting a job search or investigating a potential move. Maybe it's a relationship that needs to be mended or ended. Maybe it's your emotional life; perhaps you put too much into worry or suspicion or regret or anger.

Maybe it's your past; maybe you need to work with a therapist or attend a support group or let go of whatever has harmed you. Whatever area of your life is in need of re-formation, my friends, the Holy Spirit is ready to work within you and around you so that you may be reformed by its renewing power.

But beware. Re-formation of your life, like the re-formation of the church, is not a one-time event that happened and is safely stored in your history; it's rather an ongoing process in your ongoing life of faith. It's a never-ending process; you'll never quite get it finished, because God is never finished with you. Beware, also, of thinking that you can re-form yourself. God, who accepts you as you are and yet desires that you move toward wholeness, offers you companionship in your process of re-formation, giving you wisdom and resolve and determination and hope. But beware, again. Your re-formation isn't going to make God love you more, because God already loves you, as you are; God already knows you, from the top of your head to the tip of your toes, from your conception until this very moment; God already claims you as God's very own, just as you are.

So, come my friends, come, my fellow reformers. Come to the table of re-formation. Come and eat and drink and receive wisdom and resolve and determination and hope and love. Be sustained for the journey ahead, the journey of reformation, the journey of re-formation, the journey of always-new life in Christ. AMEN