

It's Reformation Sunday!

It doesn't feel like quite as big of a deal as last year, because 501st anniversary doesn't have quite the same ring to it that 500th anniversary has.

But it's still important to celebrate this day and to remember why the Protestant Reformation was born, as it is our heritage.

And, as church history professor Jack Arnold said,

"It is impossible to understand modern history apart from the Reformation.

We cannot understand the history of Europe, England or America without studying the Reformation.

For example, in America there would never have been Pilgrim Fathers if there had not first been a Protestant Reformation."
(Arnold, Jack. "IIM Magazine.")

So, Martin Luther was one of the main architects of the reformation, although he worked with many other church leaders and theologians.

Martin Luther wrote his famous 95 theses which were the things the Catholic church was doing or teaching, that he disagreed with, which he wanted the church to change, or reform.

One thing that he disagreed with was the fact that the church sold indulgences.

This meant that people could pay money, and then say a specific prayer assigned by the priest, and it would shorten the time that the person spent in purgatory after they died.

Another thing Martin Luther disagreed with was that salvation was achieved by works.

The traditional Catholic teaching was that we had to earn salvation through good works, but Luther believed we receive God's salvation through grace alone.

This is why I chose the scripture for today, because I believe the last verses encapsulate the ethic of the Protestant Reformation.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,

nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 38-39)

Luther was trying to take the power from the hands of the church and give it back to God, where it belonged.

The church isn't the gatekeeper to heaven, the church isn't the distributor of grace and forgiveness after sufficient confessions have been made.

The church isn't the sole interpreter of the holy scriptures, the church is not the mediator between you and your relationship with God.

Each of us is responsible for our relationship with God.

The church can be your partner, your supporter when you're struggling, but nobody in the church can mediate that relationship, myself included.

And one thing that I think was so radical about Luther's beliefs, although he wouldn't have put it this way, is that you have to love yourself as well.

If you are in a deep relationship with God that you take responsibility for, you have to love yourself.

Each of us is created in God's image, I tell you that every week at the end of the service.

Who are any of us to hate or critique or criticize that which God loves?

We don't have to do anything to earn God's love, so if we are able to accept God's love for us, why can't we extend that same love to ourselves?

For me this deep love of self is connected to the Reformation because if you know your worth, then you understand that you are in charge of co-creating your relationship with God, regardless of what the church or anyone else tells you.

If you have that deep self-love, then you're not vulnerable.

You don't get sold on schemes telling you that all you have to do is pay a little bit of money to get into heaven or to receive some forgiveness.

I know those scenarios were more prevalent about 500 years ago.

But we're still susceptible today, if in different ways.

If you have a deep love for yourself, rooted in your relationship with God, then you can ignore all the messages that tell you you'll be perfect once you lose those pounds or get rid of those wrinkles or achieve that professional milestone.

It's so easy to slip into the mindset that I'll be worthy once I accomplish this or that, but you do not have to do anything to be worthy of God's love, or of love for yourself.

We are so hard on ourselves, as the saying goes that we are all our own worst critic.

If we believe that God loves us unconditionally, without exception, then I believe God wants us to extend that same love to ourselves.

Now, we have to be careful about the fine line between self-love and egoism and arrogance.

I am not saying that you should be egotistical or think that the world revolves around you.

I am not suggesting that you think of yourself more highly than anyone else, or more deserving of happiness than anyone else.

If we aren't careful, self-love can segue into self-promotion.

What I am saying is that we need to not be our harshest critics, but to be gentle with ourselves.

Be loving, be caring, be compassionate.

I know the Golden Rule is to treat others the way you want to be treated, which is great.

But this is an incredibly loving and caring community.

We are really good at lifting each other up, so might I suggest that each of us treat ourselves the way we treat others?

Be as kind to yourself as you are to others.

We are called to be the body of Christ, but we can't be a healthy body if we are all suffering.

I am not talking about physical suffering, but spiritual suffering.

Whether we're suffering from greed or malice or arrogance or envy or self-loathing or hatred of the other, this suffering separates.

It draws a circle around us and isolates us, shrinking our space.

This suffering separates communities, families, friends, and as individuals, it separates us from our relationship with God.

This suffering is also what leads us to believe that we are inadequate, that we need something in order to be worthy.

I believe that the church telling people they need to pay money to repent for their sins, or that the church is the sole distributor of God's forgiveness is spiritually destructive.

It leads people to believe they're unworthy without the church's interception into their life of faith.

This leaves the power in the hands of the church, and the church is able to maintain control of its members.

In terms of retention of members and money in the offering plate, it makes sense to keep people dependent upon you.

But in terms of fidelity to the scriptures, it's a misinterpretation of them.

As today's text said that *nothing* can separate us from the love of Christ.

It also keeps people in a state of spiritual suffering.

Needing the church's intervention creates a situation in which we are constantly devoid of something, which we have to seek and find from the church.

It doesn't allow for self-love, because when you feel whole and complete, suddenly it appears as if you don't need the church in your life anymore.

I don't believe that empowering people to take responsibility for their relationship with God and encouraging them to love themselves deeply sidelines the church at all. It just changes our role.

The church shifts from being the intermediary between the individual and God to being more of a facilitator.

The church is the place where you go to reconnect with God, hopefully it provides you with opportunities to deepen your

relationship with God, it's a place to gather and connect with other people about God and our faith.

And I also hope it's a place where you are reminded that when we say we are *all* worthy of love, you know that you're included in that *all*.

And you're worthy of love of yourself, in fact, the church depends on us loving ourselves.

Because when we love ourselves it creates wholeness.

When I am happy and fulfilled, I understand why others want that.

When I am free from suffering and judgment of others and I feel how liberating that is, I want to create the conditions in my life,

hopefully in the church as well, so that others feel the same way.

When we love ourselves, we have love to give away, abundantly.

Love isn't a pie that has to be rationed, but when we are having trouble showing ourselves love and care and compassion, it can be really hard to extend those things to others, because we can't give people things we don't have.

But if you truly believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and if you show that love and grace to yourself, then we can share that love with the world.

And if there's one thing I think we can all agree on, it's that the world could use a little more love. Amen.