

**30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Reformation Sunday
OCTOBER 28 & 29, 2017**

**ALL SAINTS PARISH
REV. JANET FECHNER, PREACHER**

REFLECTIONS ON GOD’S WORD

Readings: DEUTERONOMY 30:1-4; PSALM 19; COLOSSIANS 3: 9b – 17; MATTHEW 5:1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I bring you greetings from my local Bishop, Rev. John Macholz, of the Upstate New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and his words of blessing for God’s peace with us as sisters and brothers in Christ’s love. And I again thank Father Fred for his gracious invitation to offer my reflections on God’s Word to us and with us today, sharing – as we say in clergy circles – the “privilege of the pulpit” with me today.

Fifty years ago this weekend I was also in a Roman Catholic church in worship – at that time, a rather unique joint service of Lutherans and Roman Catholics coming together in prayer, praise and thanksgiving commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Reformation of the church, a movement begun in 1517 that resulted in a then-new branch on the Christian family tree, commonly called “Protestants” – a name literally meaning “the protesting ones”.

Fast-forward from 1517 to 1967 - it was a couple of years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council which had begun re-forming Roman Catholic Church life... and ecumenical conversations with those Lutherans willing to have such conversations had begun as well. On that October day in 1967, we gathered in a large Roman Catholic neighborhood church in Brooklyn, NY/ (that’s the old, “regular”, Brooklyn, not the new, “posh” Brooklyn) for that much-anticipated combined worship experience of Roman Catholics and Protestants that concluded with our ringing the rafters with all of us singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”. I was 17 years old at the time, and it was great to be able to be together with both my Roman Catholic and Protestant friends, openly welcome to worship together in that sacred space. That day was the beginning for me of my life in the “ecumenical church of folks of good will, striving to work for the unity of all Christ followers”, as Jesus himself had prayed for us to be.

And fast -forward again... here we are, 50 years later, with me now a Lutheran pastor for 39 plus years... here having been worshipping with you in the pews these past months since my retirement

as a parish pastor...and today, in front of you, sharing in the celebrating and proclaiming of our common faith in the God of love, who came to us in Jesus Christ to live a human life like ours, with us, and who died for us and our salvation and rose from death through the power of God's love, blessing us with the Holy Spirit to live a resurrection life of hope. My, my, my, how far we have come in these last 50 years!

Just some brief background on the Oct. 31, 1517 Reformation Event: a German Roman Catholic monk, Bible scholar, and professor named Martin Luther put together a list of 95 issues he saw as needing reforming in the Church of his day, and he nailed that list up on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany where he was teaching in the university. It was the common way then to bring up topics for discussion – a medieval version of posting on Facebook or putting forth a challenge to debate on Twitter. That challenge to the church of his day started Luther and his followers, and other reformers who had other ideas for change, down a path of re-forming of church life, leading to ever-emerging new ways of being church together...as well as unfortunately leading to wars and sufferings and hatreds and Christian family feuds that continue to this day around the world. But that church life re-forming event also led to the realization that the Church is always re-forming in light of where it is on this earth and who the people are gathering to follow in faith in Jesus Christ in that time and place to be the Church together.

One of the ongoing gifts of the Re-formation event 500 years ago is our always holding up what we do as church – whichever specific Christian tradition we are –holding up what we are doing to see that it invites, welcomes, leads, and encourages people in their life in faith...that our church life is a help and not a hindrance to people in their life in Christ... that we haven't buried that light of the Gospel of God's love for all people under so much human-made tradition, or culture, or rules and regulations that we wind up keeping people from Christ rather than encouraging them in a life in Him.... as its says in today's reading from Deuteronomy, to chose to live lives of blessings and not curses upon the earth.

All of our religious institutions need to be on the lookout to re-form as needed, so that we center what we do on the love of God who first has loved us and calls us to live in love for God and one another, blessing us as we have heard in our Gospel reading today, and calling us to live as we have heard in the letter to our Christian ancestors in Colossians : *“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one*

another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another - as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

The on-going re-formation of Christ’s church happens in our local congregations as well as in the institutional church. One such experience I had while I was in seminary in Chicago was with a congregation that had been started by a group of immigrants from Denmark several generations ago. They had, in the nave of the church, hanging from the rafters in the middle aisle high above the heads of the worshippers, a model of a 19th century passenger sailing ship. It represented their testimony to their immigrant roots, their parish ancestors having come by ship from Denmark to the United States, emigrating to start a new life in a new land. That ship also was a symbol for them of their cultural background, recalling Viking sailing voyages and explorations centuries ago, as well as their connections to, and dependence on, seafaring and fishing throughout Denmark’s history. But their community and neighborhood were changing then in the 1970’s, and their congregation was becoming more African American than Danish American...and for the African American community, that model of a passenger ocean- sailing ship had much different symbolism and implications for these new members, those whose ancestors - genealogical or spiritual - came here by ship as well, not by choice but by capture... not for a free new life but to live as slaves who’d been ripped from their homeland, culture and history and transported against their will. So, as that congregation was re-forming its sense of how to best be Christ’s church in their present and future, they needed to decide what to do about that model ship hanging there in full view in their sanctuary: should they keep it; if they kept it, whose symbol would it be; whose history would it represent; whose experience would it memorialize? And because this emerging, re-forming congregation took the time to talk it through, and showed one another mutual respect and honor as equal brothers and sisters in Christ – putting into practicing their faith in the ways we hear in today’s Colossians reading - they came to agree on a way to embrace the various symbols, life experiences, and congregation members’ group histories that ship represented - it became an “and/both” of their individual stories and now shared history of the on-going life of that congregation, rather than an “either/or” of one “side” “winning” out over the other. They moved

on with their past histories as a strength and source of encouragement for whatever would be their “now” and “next” being church together... and came to see that ship as well in the broader symbolism of the one holy and apostolic faith that for 2000 years has used ship images to represent the church as “the ship of faith”, the Church, with Jesus at the helm, His getting us through the rough waters of all our earthly struggles, testimony to God’s promise to us in holy baptism that no matter what may come, God will never let go of us.

I know that you here at All Saints are a coming-together of two previous parishes, each with their own, and your own, personal and parish histories, and I would imagine you, too, with both joys and sorrows, have your experiences of discerning how God was calling you to be this new congregation, and what to bring with you, share with one another, or leave behind as you, too, moved into your “now” and “next” of being church in this place and time. On this, your anniversary celebrating your coming together to be All Saints Parish, may you know the blessings that come in being a re-forming parish as God leads you today into tomorrow in faith and love.

And finally: included in our bulletin today is reference to the most recent ecumenical agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, the “Declaration on the Way”, a title underscoring our journeying together on life’s road with Jesus Christ, all of us as His followers. These last 50 years of conversations among Lutheran and Roman Catholic leadership throughout the world has brought us a mutual agreement on what we have in common in Church, Ministry, and Eucharist – 32 specific statements in areas of current agreement– and 15 statements of areas still needing more conversation and working through. Not bad – 32 “agrees”, 15 “still needs work”.... much better than 500 years’ ago 95 “this has to change” statements of Martin Luther. Concluding my reflections on God’s word today I share with you this quote from my Presiding Bishop in the United States – as she speaks for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton writes: *“As the first centennial of the Reformation to take place in the context of our church’s deep ecumenical and inter-religious partnerships, this anniversary is unfolding in a spirit of reconciliation. Together with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, and other ecumenical companions, we have taken significant steps on the way to unity, justice and peace. With our inter-religious neighbors, we also have deepened mutual understanding across religious lines and collaborated for the common good.... Lutherans continue to share boldly the gifts of our tradition. One of these is Martin Luther’s insistence that the unconditional promise of God’s love in Jesus Christ frees us to love and serve our neighbors. This counter-cultural message is as fitting for us today as it was for Christians 500 years ago.... On this day, and into God’s future, we are called to be a public witness to how God is*

continually at work, in and through us, re-forming the body of Christ in a world broken by sin. Thanks be to God.” And let the people of God say: “Amen!