

This coming Sunday, October 31, is an important day. Yes, it is that holiday we know as Halloween, but I am referring to the religious holiday known as Reformation Day. This year marks the 493rd anniversary of the day Martin Luther, a priest and university professor, posted a copy of his 95 *Theses* to the front doors of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. (As the title suggests, this document was essentially a list of 95 ideas – 95 complaints against the institutional Church of Rome.) Luther's public stance against the teachings of the Roman Church set off one of the most significant religious/social/political shifts in Western history. The Reformation movement, lasting from 1517-1648, changed the shape of Christianity in Europe, and ultimately, throughout the world.

The story of the Reformation is a long and complicated one, and even a brief account of its events would take much longer than is appropriate for a column such as this. I will simply point out that the thrust of the movement, as well as the result, was the freedom of Christians to proclaim the good news of salvation through God's *grace*, given in Jesus Christ.

In the context of 16th-century Europe, this was actually a pretty radical proclamation of Christian faith. In a world where the institution of the Church claimed to possess such power to grant (or withhold) salvation, this idea of salvation by God's grace alone became a new witness to the gospel, despite its deep roots in the ancient Christian Scriptures.

As a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), this witness of God's grace and mercy is central to the gospel I am called to proclaim and to live out, just as it is for many Christians of many other denominations who stem from the Reformation (and Counter-Reformation) movement(s). As a citizen of 21st-century America, however, I am aware that such is not always the witness that we live into or experience in our society.

It seems that "Christianity" is becoming more difficult to define in our culture. With competing claims to the expectations, qualifiers, and requirements of what it means to follow Jesus in a life of faith, the Christian witnesses to the gospel as we experience it today can be confusing at best, with the potential to cause great harm.

As people of faith, this is an important reality to consider. As we remember the Reformation that opened the way for freedom to proclaim *good news*, we might wrestle with the question of how are *we* witnessing to the good news of salvation in God's grace? What is your witness, or your church community's witness to the gospel? I am not just asking for personal reflection. I truly would like to know what you think, and invite your conversation with your pastor or one of the other Brodhead area clergy.

For readers who do not currently participate with a local congregation, what sort of Christian witness are you seeing in your community? Is it a witness that proclaims grace and mercy, acceptance and welcome, or is it a witness that turns you away? Is it a witness of good news that invites you to wholeness in your life? If not, what sort of news is it? Again, I really would like to know experience and encourage a response to myself or one of the other local clergy.

I look forward to the conversation of how, whether or not, good news is being shared in this place!

Grace and Peace,

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