

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on November 1, 2020
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Luke 6:27-36

Welcome to All Saints Sunday and to Reformation Sunday in the Protestant tradition! The All Saints Day tradition dates back to the 8th Century when it was instituted by Pope Gregory III. It's original intent was to be a sort of catch-all feast day for all the saints, which had proliferated in number greatly, who were not considered significant enough to be given their own feast day on the Gregorian Calendar of the church. It followed All Hallows' Eve, the holiday we know as Halloween, which was a time when the spirits of the restless dead were believed to walk the night. The notion of which came first, Halloween or All Saints Day, is a point of contention among scholars of Christian history. Some maintain that Halloween was a Christianized version of an ancient Celtic festival called Samhain. Others argue that All Saints Day is the older of the two and that the idea of Halloween as the “eve” of Hallows Day or All Saints Day came much later.

Having left the veneration of “saints” behind, the celebration of All Saints Day in the Protestant tradition came to represent the remembrance of all people who have died, as the “saints” who have already gone on to heaven, the “church triumphant.” This is done primarily through the recalling of the names of the departed through some sort of ritualistic means, as we have done this morning. What many of us don't realize is that Reformation Day is also celebrated each day on October 31 with whatever Sunday follows as Reformation Sunday. It quite often coincides with All Saints Sunday which seems quite appropriate when you think about. If there was a “saint” of the Reformation, it would surely be Martin Luther. This unassuming, somewhat cranky German monk kicked into high gear the Reformation rumblings already present. He did this by penning what was essentially a complaint letter to church officials. This document was called the *Ninety-Five Theses* and he sent it to his Archbishop, the Archbishop of Mainz, Germany on October 31, 1517. In keeping with the tradition of the time, Luther probably also posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the local church which just happened to be the All Saints Church. Luther's original intent with his document was to begin what he

hoped would be a conversation with church leadership on what he saw as much needed reforms. They were not received that way Luther and he was eventually excommunicated for heresy in 1521 and the Reformation took off in earnest.

We are a part of that long trajectory of history which began back in the 16th century and continues on today here in the 21st century. 500 years of theological debates, arguments, splits, schisms and bloody, relentless wars have littered the path through history that all of us in the Protestant tradition now must claim as our heritage. The so-called mainline branch of Protestant tradition is where we fall as members of the United Church of Christ along with the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodists, the American Baptist Churches, the Disciples of Christ and the Episcopalians. The other branch of the Protestant tradition is what can be thought of as the “free church” tradition, an interesting name given that these churches often have the most rigorous, and conservative, belief systems in Christendom. In this branch would be the Southern Baptists, the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal churches and “free” Baptist churches like the Church of the Open Door and the Lighthouse Baptist Community Church right here in Stonington. Then, floating around the edges of the Protestant tradition are certain sects with more non-traditional beliefs and practices, like the Quakers, the Church of Christ, Scientist, the Anabaptists like the Amish and Mennonites and the Mormons, just to name a few. When you consider the rich tapestry that the Protestant tradition is today, you can’t help but think of Martin Luther, a cranky 16th century German monk just wanting the church to think more deeply about itself. Who says that a well worded letter sent to the right person at the perfect time can’t make a huge difference!

Luther does not seem to have mourned his excommunication for too long and jumped enthusiastically into this work of creating a new way for church to be church. His theological work in this regard is prodigious, still studied today in seminaries and divinity schools today. He was also an enthusiastic composer of hymns, both the words and often the music. He is the composer of today’s focus hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” which is considered the premier hymn of the Reformation. The unique and majestic tune is instantly recognizable even if people can’t remember which

hymn it is. This is quickly rectified once the singing begins as the tune and the hymn itself receives its name in the opening phrase, “a mighty fortress is our God.”

Luther wrote both the tune and the lyrics to this beloved hymn which contains a summary of his, at the time, revolutionary understanding of what the church should be in its function of forming followers of Christ. Several of Luther’s key principles of practicing the Christian faith are quite visible in the hymn’s verses. For one, Luther advocated for what he called the priesthood of all believers: “A mighty fortress is *our* God, a bulwark never failing.” Luther here makes clear that Christians have direct access to God themselves with no need of a priest to serve as an intermediary. People could pray directly to God to offer thanks, to request forgiveness or help with any sort of problem. People could confess their sins directly to God without the need of a priest to hear their confession and then assign an appropriate penance. “Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he.” People could appeal directly to Christ for grace made possible through his act of redemption by dying on the cross for everyone’s sins. But Jesus for Luther, is very, very human. Luther believed that one’s destiny before God was completely in one’s own hands. Neither a priest nor the hierarchy and dogma of the church were needed for personal salvation. Only a contrite heart and a genuine desire to become a new person in Christ was all that was needed. And there was always important work for this new person in Christ to do in God’s kingdom: “We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.” Not only do individuals not need a priest to be cleansed of sin, each one is perfectly capable of being an instrument of God’s will just by being who they are as redeemed followers of Christ.

Luther’s theology as revealed in this hymn is a theology intent of empowering and emboldening each person who hears the Gospel of Jesus Christ to become a direct part of God’s work in the world. He emphasizes the personal responsibility of the individual to act as one transformed in Christ in the way he or she lives life each day. This is why for me, the Gospel text from Luke which we read this morning captures what I think Luther was attempting to say in this magnificent hymn. Taken from what is sometimes called Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, Jesus in this text talks about

being transformed by love. This is the passage where Jesus gives the extraordinary direction to “love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Wow! Those words are just as extraordinary in this moment of our history as the most contentious and significant election of our lives is coming up on Tuesday. There is certainly a lot of hating and cursing and abuse going on right now, on a scale I don’t remember seeing connected to an election ever before. But it is this year, and it’s very, very scary. How are we to cope? What are we to do as anticipate Tuesday with excitement and hope tinged by fear of all that could go wrong?

Well, we can see Luther’s answer in verse 3. “And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.” God has willed his truth to triumph *through us!* You and me. For Luther, the devils he faced wore the clergy garb of the Roman Catholic Church, the most powerful institution in the world at that moment in time. Kings and queens bowed down to the will of the Pope, but then there’s Martin writing a letter with 95 suggestions about things he knew the church could do better – things he believed God wanted the church to do better. If ever anybody had a reason to be scared of all the bad things that could happen, it was Luther. But he just kept going. Writing hymns and treatises, gathering followers, forming churches along a model he thought more workable. Luther, at his most basic, trusted that God was God and that God loved his Creation, his beloved people – even the ones he saw as “devils.” Luther trusted completely in the saving grace of Jesus as available to anyone who was open to receiving it and being transformed by it. “Do unto others as you would have them do to you,” were the words of Jesus in this Sermon on the Plain. Luther probably would not have said this so gently as Jesus does as Luther saw the Devil as a personified being lurking everywhere. But, he does believe without question that “the Spirit and the gift are ours, through him who with us sideth. ... God’s truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever.”

Luther’s right, you know. God’s truth abides still, even here and now, even as this most anxiety provoking election looms like a thunder cloud over the week ahead. Jesus is right too. As we think about all those people who will not be voting for the candidates we choose, let’s remember that we

are all one before God. Jesus reminds us in Luke “if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same.” Jesus makes very clear that we must rise above and move beyond the fractiousness of this election, especially if we can’t imagine how to do that very thing. How? Jesus makes that clear too: “love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High.” And that, Luther reminds us, is all we need: “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.”

Dear ones, whatever the outcome of this election on Tuesday, God is now and will forever be our fortress and refuge, a bulwark never failing. As Luther’s words of 500 years ago remind us, God is our helper amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. And in 500 years there have been a lot of mortal ills prevailing! The thing is, whatever happens, we can handle it, we will handle it, because we won’t be facing it alone. We will be facing it together as God’s beloved people. Our strength, our ability to confront reality whether joyful or painful, comes not from ourselves but from that bulwark of hope we claim as our own Jesus Christ.

Dear ones, as we sit here surrounded by our great cloud of witnesses and saints whom we are holding close in memory this day, let’s go forward into this momentous week in confidence and hope that all will be well, that we will be well. And please, please, please – if you have not already done so, please vote. I would like to end this morning with a prayer, the UCC prayer for Election 2020: Loving God, we go with your love to exercise the responsibility each of us carries in this democracy to vote. We pray for all people who join with us to cast their ballots even as we pray for hope, equality, wholeness, and health for all people created in your image and for your glorious creation, our earth. May your love sustain us. Amen.”