

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, October 30, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Habakkuk 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 19:1-10**  
**“Semper reformanda”**

The last Sunday in October has been designated, in Reformed Protestant churches at least, as Reformation Sunday. The date was chosen because of a change that started to come about in the church in the western world 499 years ago tomorrow, on October 31, 1517.

The change began through the actions of one Martin Luther. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany. His father was a copper miner, but he had dreams for his son that he would go to university and become a lawyer. Martin started along the path towards law studies in Erfurt, but felt called instead to the religious life, and in 1505 became a monk in the Augustinian order. He was ordained as a priest in 1507, and began teaching at the University of Wittenberg, while he continued theological studies. In 1512 he received his doctorate in theology and was appointed to the chair of theology. He would spend the rest of his life teaching in the University of Wittenberg.

In 1510, he visited Rome on behalf of a number of Augustinian monasteries and was appalled by what he saw as the corruption that he found there, especially by the sale of what were called indulgences. Buying indulgences meant that one could buy a way out of punishment for sin, either for someone still living, or for someone who had already died and was believed to be in purgatory.

Early in 1517, Pope Leo X announced a new round of indulgences to help rebuild St Peter's Basilica in Rome. This was the last straw for Luther. On October 31, 1517, he nailed a sheet of paper to the door of the university chapel. It was titled "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," and contained Luther's famous 95 Theses. He intended these to be starting points for discussion, but they amounted to a devastating attack on the sale of indulgences as corrupting people's faith. Luther also sent a copy to Archbishop Albert Albrecht of Mainz, who was a strong proponent of indulgences, calling on him to end the sale.

Aided by the latest technology in the form of the printing press, copies of the 95 Theses spread throughout Germany within two weeks, and throughout Europe within two months. Luther's conviction was that Christians are saved through faith

and not through their own efforts, and in 1519-1520, he wrote a series of pamphlets developing his ideas. These too spread quickly across Europe.

But coming on top of the 95 Theses, he found himself increasingly in conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. In January 1521, Pope Leo X declared Luther excommunicated. He was then summoned to appear at the Diet of Worms, an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire. There he was tried for heresy. He refused to recant, uttering the most famous words attributed to him: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Emperor Charles V declared him an outlaw and a heretic, and he went into hiding at Wartburg Castle. In 1522, he felt able to return to Wittenberg, and in 1525 he married Katharina von Bora, a former nun, with whom he had six children. Being a former monk and priest, marrying a former nun, and having six children, did not exactly endear him to the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1534, Luther published a complete translation of the Bible into German, underpinning his belief that people should be able to read the Bible for themselves and in their own language. The translation contributed significantly to the spread and development of the use of languages other than the Latin that was almost exclusively used in worship. His influence spread across northern and eastern Europe and his fame made Wittenberg an intellectual centre. During a trip to his hometown of Eisleben, he died on February 18, 1546, at age 62.

Martin Luther is one of the most influential figures in the European Reformation and in the history of the church in Europe and the western world. His actions split the church in western Europe into new factions and denominations. And in fact, there is a direct line through the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland, to the Reformation in Scotland, to the Presbyterian Church in Canada today. But it has to be said that Luther's 95 Theses also started a move towards reform within the Roman Catholic Church. He was a respected scholar and theologian, but his overriding passion was for people to build close personal relationship with God.

I took my sermon title for today from the Latin phrase that is sometimes used of the Reformed Protestant churches. Like so much theology, it may be just a little bit obscure unless you have had a classical education. Does anyone study Latin today?

The full phrase is *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. Ecclesia – the church; is reformata – reformed; sed semper; but always; reformanda – either reforming or

in need of being reformed. The reformed church is always reforming or in need of reformation.

Semper reformanda. As we look back over what, next year, will be 500 years of Reformation history, it is all too easy to think that it all came about quite smoothly and easily. Of course, that is not the way it happened. People don't like the idea of change. At least, they don't like the idea of changing.

I have a cartoon strip somewhere in my files. In the first panel, the preacher is asking, 'Who wants change?' In the second panel, the congregation are on their feet shouting, 'We do, we do!' In the third panel, the preacher asks, 'Who wants to change?' In the final panel, no-one in the congregation has moved.

It is so much more comfortable not to have to deal with change, so much easier to live with what we know and recognise and are familiar with, so much easier to continue along the road we have been on for what feels like forever, than to have to face change. Change unsettles us. It disturbs us. It scares us.

But if we accept what many observers of the western church are saying, we are going through a time of major change right now. One of these observers was Phyllis Tickle, who died last year at the age of 81. In her book The Great Emergence, she identified a pattern of a major event in the life of the church occurring every 500 years or so.

In the sixth century, a famine struck Rome. The then Pope, Gregory, ordered that the income from the nearly two thousand square miles of land that the Church controlled, income that until then was kept within the Church, should be used to feed the people who were suffering because of the famine. That action resulted in the Church becoming a major political force among the many principalities that made up Italy for centuries.

500 years later, in the 11th century, what is referred to as the Great Schism took place, over what may now seem to be a very fine point of theology. The result was an east-west split in the church that established the produced Roman Catholic Church in western Europe and the Orthodox Churches in eastern Europe.

And another 500 years on, as we acknowledge today, in the 16th century, Martin Luther appeared on the scene and began what grew into the Reformation in Europe.

Phyllis Tickle argued that 500 years later, in the late 20th and early 21st century, Christianity is undergoing a similar sort of upheaval in which old ideas are being rejected and new ones are emerging. Modern Christianity, she believed, is entering what she called a "post-denominational" mode in which old structures will either disappear or adapt to changing times.

Was she correct? What the church in the western world is going through right now does seem like drastic and radical change. But is it overstating things to compare what we are going through with the Reformation of the 16th century, and the Great Schism of the 11th century? It is certainly overstating things to say that New St James is going through or needs to go through a reformation as we face the changes that we are starting to experience. But who knows? Only time will tell.

But we do have some pretty dramatic examples in Scripture of change, of reformation. And there is no greater example of change or reformation in a person's life than in the story of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus, the tax collector of Jericho. A man despised for his job, exacting Roman taxes from the occupied people of his own nation, and in the process making a pretty good living for himself. A man who must have been a figure of ridicule, so short in stature that he had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus. And to everyone's amazement, the man who was called down by Jesus so that Jesus could come to his home.

And, no doubt to even greater amazement, declaring that *half of my possessions ... I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much*' Luke 19:8. A life reformata indeed. And all it took was a direct, personal encounter with God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, those of us who were here in worship had the privilege of hearing the most powerful testimony I have heard in New St James of the change that comes when a person has a direct, personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. I want to quote something that Blu Say said:

if I let God in, if I let God guide me, if I let him walk through life with me, wherever I am, wherever I go, I will always be home because home is wherever God is.

Dunno about you, but that kind of puts any fears I may have about *semper reformanda* in a whole new perspective.