

A “Little” Reformation

Dear Friends in Christ:

A lot of people at my age and season of life often develop what is called a “*bucket list*” – things you want to do or see before you die! I’ve never really had much of a “*bucket list*,” [*just a few things*] believing as a Christian that the best of life is not measured by what is experienced here on earth. In fact, the only thing that truly matters when I “*kick the bucket*” is that this sinner named Preston has been “*saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone!*” Indeed, that Biblical teaching is at the heart of our Reformation worship today, and if such assurance and hope is not on your or my “*bucket list*” then nothing will ever bring us present day peace and everlasting joy!

Now, having affirmed that priority principle of faith, let me tell you about one trip that’s been on my personal “*bucket list*” for a long time. As a Lutheran pastor I’ve always wanted to visit Wittenberg, Germany, the adopted home of Martin Luther and the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation. Just last month we traveled to Europe to fulfill that dream, along with a cruise on the Rhine River. I just knew my preaching on this Reformation Sunday was going to be enriched, having just worshipped in the Town Church of Wittenberg and seeing the very pulpit from which Luther preached! The plan was to attend an evening organ concert that same Sunday at the restored Castle Church where the 95 Theses were originally posted! I was going to walk the streets of Wittenberg, see the Lutherhaus where Martin and Katy raised their family and most likely have a beer in a local Brewhaus, raising a salute to a simple monk used by God to proclaim the name of Jesus!

But as so often happens in life, “*buckets*” have “*holes*” in them, and two days of flight delays and missed connections caused us to miss the pre-cruise trip to Wittenberg. To be sure, I was disappointed, but in reflection, I realized that even though the actual “*trip*” to didn’t take place, the “*visit*” was nonetheless fulfilled...in my mind and heart,

through all of the planning, looking at pictures and using that little man on Google Maps to visually “walk” the streets and see the sights of Wittenberg. In fact, it’s so small a town that my tour book says: *“Wittenberg’s sights can be seen in just a few hours. Yet, Lutherstadt Wittenberg has a gigantic history that belies this small city’s claim to fame.”* (Rick Steves, Germany 2018, pp. 646-647)

And on that thought, today’s Reformation sermon emerged, my *“bucket list debacle”* reminding me of how often God uses that which is *“small”* and *“little”* and *“ordinary”* to pour out His grace and love. It was not so important that I get to Wittenberg, but that we know God was there in history, the Holy Spirit sparking the heart of a sinner named Martin Luther to restore to the church the true teaching of Scripture that we are *“justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...to be received by faith.”* (Romans 3:22-25) God calls us His own not by works, not by the law, not by any pilgrimages to holy places, for we are *“saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone!”* It is the heart of the Gospel message, and that is no *“little”* thing, for *“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him, might not perish but have everlasting life!”* (John 3:16)

It’s always been that way in God’s plan, using that which is *“little”* and *“small”* and *“ordinary”* to pour out His grace and love. By the power of simple words, *“Let there be...and there was,”* God created the world and everything in it! In His Son, Jesus Christ, *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”* born as a *“tiny”* Babe in the *“little town of Bethlehem.”* Prior to beginning his public ministry, Jesus spends the first 30 years of life in the *“small”* town of Nazareth, so insignificant a place that Nathaniel questioned, when invited to come and see Jesus: *“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”* (John 1:46)

And did it ever, the Son of God reaching out to the lowly, the least and the lost, inviting sinners and skeptics, hypocrites and harlots, tax collectors and ordinary fisherman to new life! Jesus extended the invitation of forgiveness and redemption to all, welcoming *“little children”* into the Kingdom; encouraging the weak and heavy-laden to cast all their cares on Him! The Mighty God, King and Lord, enters the

Holy City of Jerusalem riding on the back of a “*lowly*” donkey! His crown made of thorns, His throne a rugged cross, His burial plot a borrowed grave - yet Jesus fulfills the Father’s Master plan, dying on Calvary’s Cross to save the world from sin and death; rising on Easter morn to give life to all who believe – even too little old ordinary sinners like you and me!

How important it is, my friends, before we “*kick the bucket*” to confess and believe that “*we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...to be received by faith.*” (Romans 3:22-25) The world and culture around us today says that what are important are our plans and possessions, our travels and trips, our health and wealth, everything going our way and according to our time frame! But when this earthly life ends none of those “*things*” will loom large or bring comfort, hope and peace! I have yet to see a hearse pulling a U-Haul to the gravesite because the only thing that matters when our “*buckets have holes in them*” is to be filled with “*springs of [living] water*” (Revelation 14:7) - the Savior’s everlasting promise fulfilled: “*When the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!*” (John 8:36)

So just as the Reformation in that “*little*” town of Wittenberg sparked change and renewal in the church and in people’s lives, so I’m praying today for a “**little**” **Reformation** in your life and mine. How about we post some new “*theses*” to the door of our hearts, so “*re-formed*” in our thinking and so “*re-newed*” by the Holy Spirit, that our walk and way in this world is guided by faith and trust in Christ? Yes, life can be tough; sin and death, disappointment and failures abound! Life plans get interrupted by flight delays, family conflict and financial setback, untimely illness and death, intrusive demands, and a lot of our “*bucket list*” hopes and dreams will have holes in them! That’s life!!! But a “**little**” **Reformation** leads us in the midst of life’s setbacks to greater reliance on the promises of God’s Word, grabbing hold and clinging tight each day to the hope we have in Christ! Such is the faith which framed Luther’s great Reformation Hymn:

*A mighty fortress is our God,
a trusty shield and weapon;*

*he helps us free from every need
that hath us now o'er taken.*

*Were they to take our house,
goods, honor, child or spouse,
though life be wrenched away
they cannot win the day.
The Kingdom's ours forever!*

(Lutheran Service Book, 656, 657)

How I pray that such assurance and hope is on your daily “*bucket list*,” a “**little**” reformation sparked in your heart and life, placing your hope in Christ...and Christ alone! A “*little*” **Reformation**...in the Name of Jesus! AMEN.

- Rev. Preston E. Wagner, Pastor *Emeritus*
Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, NC