

## ***Semper Reformanda***

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Exodus 20:1-17

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
United Church of Christ  
Reformation Sunday – November 5, 2017

### I.

A reading from the Book of Exodus. This reading includes the list known as the 10 Commandments. These were given to Moses to share with all the people Israel as they traveled through the wilderness. Here are the words God spoke. The first three commandments are about our actions toward God.

1. I am the Lord your God, the God of liberation. Do not put the gods of slavery in place of me.
2. Do not reduce me to the manageable size of a statue. I, the living God, am not made of wood or stone. Not even your words and rituals can contain me.
3. Do not boost your own agendas by throwing around the holy name of God.

The fourth commandment is about special day and the practice of rest:

4. Honor me, the God of freedom, by taking and giving everyone a day off, a day to remember that creation is precious, that life is more than work, and that material possessions will never satisfy. Do this to imitate the Lord your God who rested on the seventh day to enjoy the work of creation.

The next five are about how to treat other people:

5. Honor your mom and dad, and all your ancestors.
6. Do not kill people and don't do things that cause violence.
7. Remain committed in your relationships.
8. Don't steal things that belong to others.
9. Don't lie about other people.

The final commandment is about the most important change you can make to your own attitude.

10. Refuse to compete with your neighbor and don't desire what belongs to them.

### II.

Today we recognize the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, specifically, the anniversary of October 31, 1517, the day an Augustinian monk named Martin

Luther nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, a document listing 95 theses, or grievances, he had with the Roman Catholic Church of his day. I imagine that most of you will be happy to know I'm not about to give a lecture on the history of the Reformation.

Instead, I'd like to point out a few things that can help us understand why what a monk did 500 years ago continues to inform the church and the whole world.

1. First, look at what we just did. Together we read the scripture as a congregation in our own language. Before the Reformation, scripture was in Latin, read and interpreted by professionals. So, what we just did was a radical Protestant move.
2. Second, the word "Protestant" means, literally, a positive witness - "pro", meaning positive, and "test" as in testament, or witness. If you read Martin Luther's 95 theses, they don't sound very positive. In fact, they rail against all sorts of people - Catholics, Jews, and others. A lot of violence came in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, but the intention was to articulate a positive and constructive way of the being the church with, for, and by the people.
3. Third, another way to talk about "with, for, and by the people" that came out of the Protestant Reformation is this phrase: "the priesthood of all believers." Before the Reformation, there were very clearly two classes of religious people: the professional clergy, on one hand, and everyone else on the other. The priesthood of all believers broke down this barrier. Now anyone can minister to anyone else. Even clergy like Pastor Rachel and Rev. Plaugher and I are called out of the congregation of which we are members to receive education and training so that we may serve, not in place of, but alongside all the members of the church.
4. Fourth, Martin Luther's primary grievance with the church was with what were called "indulgences." Indulgences were amounts of money people would pay to the authorities because the authorities promised that God would love them more if they did. Luther said that God loves us because God is a loving God and all that is required is the faith to reach out and receive it. When we gather pledges or receive an offering in church, it is never to earn God's love or approval. We give as a grateful response to God's generosity.
5. Fifth, it is more accurate to speak of "reformations" in the plural rather than a single Reformation. Jan Hus in what is now the Czech Republic was a leader in a reformation that preceded Martin Luther by a century. Erasmus was a Dutch Reformer who influenced Martin Luther decades before the 95 Theses. Following Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and Jean Calvin in Switzerland initiated a reformation that spread throughout the globe. And the Roman Catholic

Church initiate what is called the Counter-Reformation which was a reformation that happened within the Catholic Church itself.

6. Sixth – don't worry, this is the last one, I'm not going to do 95 – Martin Luther used this saying in Latin: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*” which means, “the church must always be reforming.” So, the reformation isn't just something that happened 500 years ago. Reformation is part of the work that the church, globally, nationally, and even here in our own local church, must *always* be doing, we must always be reforming as we discern what it means to be faithful to our teacher and guide, Jesus the Christ, and as we seek to put our faith into action.

### III.

Here are a few ideas about how our church might be continuing the process of reformation:

- We have decided as a congregation to be Open & Affirming, which means that we not only welcome but affirm the full humanity of people with many identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
- Our church has chosen to become a resource to the wider community. With our facility, without requiring religious affiliation, we host diverse gatherings of people including Girl Scouts, Rotary Club, a Preschool, Cross-fit Trainings, Healing Events, Disaster Response efforts, Violin concerts, and over 30 week 12-step recovery meetings.
- Perhaps it is too obvious to mention that, beyond Martin Luther's imagining, the leadership of women in our church is not only allowed, it is the lifeblood of our congregation.
- Less obvious is the degree to which children are not only participating in, but leading our congregation with new ideas, questions, assumptions, and energy. Our young people are making pledges and supporting the church financially. They are asking to be included in the worshiping life of the congregation, even to lead worship. They are building community and creating new opportunities for service. They are participating in the sacraments and modeling for us adults what faithful discipleship looks like.
- We are experiencing reformation through the process of stepping into a new governance model.
- We are reforming the way we think about money, the way we talk about money, and the way we ask for money. We are encouraging one another to become the generous people God calls us to be, not only for the sake of the church but for the life of the world.

- We practice “semper reformanda” when we risk believing that God in Christ is constantly in the process of renewing and reforming the church in ways we have yet to imagine.

#### IV.

Not everyone here will remember the scene in the old Mel Brooks film, “History of the World, Part 1” when Moses comes down the mountain holding three tablets of stone and says, “People of Israel, the Lord God has given us these rules to live by: the 15 (he drops one of them and it shatters), no, the 10 commandments.”

The way the Book of Exodus tells it is not too different from that movie.

Moses gets so mad at the people that he destroys the first tablets.

Later, God encourages him to create a new set.

It seems that Moses, and even God, are in the business of “semper reformanda,” always renewing, reforming, reimagining, reengaging.

If you could provide a protest, that is, a positive witness, to the future of the church, either locally, nationally, or globally, what would it be?

Following this service, you’ll have a chance to share your ideas.

We have a door outside along with some sticky notes, a hammer, and 95 thumbtacks.

You’re invited to share your prayer for a more faithful church by writing it on the note, and using the hammer to tack it to the door.

Be careful before you do it – not because you might bruise your thumb, which you might – but because I have a feeling that whatever you put on that door God is going to ask you to be the first one to embody it.

It seems that “semper reformanda” is not just the truth of the church, but of every human created by God. Amen.