

## Reformation Commemoration Sermon

John 15

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Mary Bernadette moved into my neighborhood when we were both nine. She was the oldest of eight children. I was the younger of two. We sat together on the school bus and became fast friends. One Monday morning, she told me about a new family at her parish that had “seen the light.” I was puzzled by that expression, so I asked what it meant. She said that she didn’t really know except that the family used to be Lutheran. I had overheard similarly puzzling messages about Catholics not being Christian and Evangelist Billy Graham being in some “hot water” for inviting them to his crusades. I didn’t understand that either. A lot of things are puzzling for nine-year-olds. We weren’t at all worried about any of it so we moved on to the much more interesting topic of my upcoming birthday party.

Mary Bernadette and I were growing up in a reformed and reforming world where the Vatican 2 changes were starting to take hold, and the merger that would form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wouldn’t take place for another 15 years. At that time, for the most part, each religious entity still believed that it, and only it, possessed the real Truth (with a capital T). That fact didn’t keep us from being friends. It was just that, on Sunday mornings, Mary Bernadette went to St. Joseph and I went to Salem.

I don’t remember much from my childhood, but I vividly remember that. To put it in the context of our Gospel lesson, it was as if there was a Lutheran Jesus vine over here, a Catholic Jesus vine out here, a Baptist Jesus vine over there... and Methodist and Presbyterian and Episcopal and so on. We each had our own Jesus, and ours was certainly the RIGHT one, the one who spoke most often about the things that mattered to us. And right off the top, the Catholics got a bonus because they could also talk to Mary, and she understood. We knew who Mary was, but we didn’t talk to her.

It certainly didn’t occur to me as a nine-year-old, but dividing Jesus in this way wasn’t and isn’t ever correct. And if the study from Gordon-Conwell Seminary is accurate, we have succeeded in dividing Jesus into at least 41,000 denominational pieces when there is actually only one Jesus vine and, through the ages, billions of branches, because we as individuals (and not just our denominational affiliations) are the branches Jesus is referring to in our text.

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Martin Luther didn’t set out to divide the church, of course, but he was not a gentle soul. Had he posted 5 theses rather than 95, we would probably all be Catholic or maybe Zwinglian today. But passionate, over-zealous Luther thundered with shocking and polarizing language, the printing press echoed his words at breakneck speed and, though there had been many reforms through the centuries, the Reformation (with a capital R) had now begun.

And, in the 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation, the chasm between us has grown, and we, the body of Christ, have broken into more and more pieces, over the content of those theses, certainly, but also over the color of the new carpet in the parish hall

and the words we use to describe God

and whether we side with Israel or Palestine or both or neither.

And thousands of other things, most of which are adiaphora. Martin Luther was a starter in this movement, but there were others, some within the church, some without. Most had a passion for Scripture and the best of intentions, but this movement has not been esoteric. Some reforms removed obstacles; but others built them. And along the way, many have seen our Christian infighting, shaken their heads, and simply walked away from the church completely, choosing instead to be what is often called “spiritual but not religious” and cutting away the other branches of the Jesus vine in order to have the “real” Jesus to themselves.

Luther’s famous phrase, “simul justus et peccator,” is spoken often in Lutheran settings. It is part of a very limited enduring Latin vocabulary for Lutherans, and translates that we are simultaneously justified and sinners. It describes the human condition, but it also applies to bigger issue of the Reformation itself because, as some of the reforms succeeded in drawing us closer to God, many also pulled us not only from God but from our brothers and sisters as well. And Martin Luther wasn’t the only over-zealous one. Many voices continue to pull us in one way or another. Those in every age have been part of this struggle.

But in our life time there is being revealed a new chapter. Conversations have happened on school buses and at coffee tables and in meeting rooms all over the world, and in the last 50 years, our official dialogue has been significant. And we are learning that, with the 32 agreements discussed in Declaration on the Way, we can stand together, pray together, learn from each other, and work together for the sake of Jesus Christ. We can acknowledge that differences – significant differences – remain but that there is no need for vast chasms of separation. Rather than warring over transubstantiation versus consubstantiation, we can put that disagreement to the side, because people are hungry now, and together we can feed them. We can take our differing understandings of apostolicity, set them over here and, together, bring good news to those in prison. We can hit the pause button on our disagreement about who qualifies for ordination and join hands in prayer for the sick. We can welcome the stranger together. Our differences are important, but they need not divide us more than they already have.

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Prior to my seminary education, I spent three summers in graduate school – I was the only non-Catholic in my class. Every day there was Mass. Every day I remained in the pew, unable to fully participate. But during those three summers, I only sat in the pew alone on the first day. From then on, at least one of my classmates remained in the pew with me, feeling the division, certainly, but also feeling connected in a new and different way to the Jesus vine.

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Forty years ago, neither Mary Bernadette nor I could see a day when Lutherans and Catholics would come together to remember, to repent, to worship, and to look forward together. Back then, my dream was to be a lawyer. Mary Bernadette wanted to be a nun. I ended up at Seminary instead of Law School and married a good Polish Catholic man. Mary Bernadette went to convent school and is now married to a good Irish Catholic man. And I learned this week that Mary Bernadette’s mischievous little brother who liked to secretly listen in on our conversations is now Monsignor Joseph.

We are branches of the Jesus vine together. Amen