

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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At yesterday's Synod Council retreat, our newly elected bishop, Erik Christensen, told us about some things he carries whenever he moves into a new office. Cards. Notes. Little reminders of people and places that have shaped his ministry. He recently hung up one of those reminders—a paper leaf with these words: “When the right questions get framed, the reformation begins.”

I've been thinking about that little leaf, especially today, on Reformation Sunday. After all, more than five hundred years ago, Martin Luther began asking uncomfortable questions about the church he loved. Questions like: Could God's forgiveness be bought? Who could claim to control God's grace? What happens when the church's practices stop reflecting the good news it proclaims? Now, Luther certainly didn't get every answer right. But his questions challenged things the church had taken for granted.

And, maybe that's why certain questions make us uncomfortable. They ask us to look again at something we thought we understood, or something we thought was settled. And sometimes, they show us something we'd rather not see.

In today's gospel, Jesus said to people who have believed in him, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” And their response was essentially, “What do you mean, free? We're already free!” You see, Jesus offered freedom, and they immediately explained why they didn't need it. And

I think it's often easier to spot that kind of resistance in somebody else than in ourselves. Especially when we're reconsidering something we love.

And on this Homecoming Sunday, that hits a little close to home. There's a lot to love about WPLC. More people are finding their way here. And that growth is changing what it feels like to be part of this community. At the same time, our Congregation Council has been reading Alice Mann's book *The In-Between Church*, about how congregations change as they grow. And at our last meeting, we pondered her question that is worth sitting with: What do we gain, and what do we lose, as we grow?

What we realized was that some of the things we might lose aren't small things at all. Like recognizing almost every face on Sunday morning, easily catching up during fellowship time, or seeing nearly everyone at the same events after worship. As more people become part of this congregation, those familiar ways of being together don't always work quite the same way. And that can be unsettling. You can be glad to see new faces and still miss the closeness you knew. You can love this congregation and wonder what happens to the church you know. Maybe that's where Jesus' words come closer to home. We can recognize that things are changing and still hold tightly to the way we think they ought to be.

But in today's reading from Jeremiah, we heard a promise spoken to Israel and Judah as they faced upheaval and loss. God said, "I will make." "I will put." "I will write." "I will forgive." God promised a renewed covenant, with God's teaching written upon their hearts. From the least to the greatest, all will know God. And notice who's doing the work. It's not Israel or Judah. It's not their leaders. It's God. God's faithfulness comes first.

So too in John's gospel, Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Not, "If you figure everything out, you'll be free." For, Christ gives what we can't give ourselves. We are loved even when we're unsure, even when we're afraid, even when what felt familiar begins to change. Our hope has never depended on holding everything in place. It has always rested in God's faithfulness. And it always will.

And that freedom opens us to gifts we can't yet imagine. People we haven't met. Relationships that haven't begun. Ways of serving and caring for one another that wouldn't have occurred to us a few years ago. There can be real joy in discovering that the life we share is larger than the version we've already known.

And, we've already seen what can happen when we ask a different question. One year ago, on this very Sunday we were preparing to begin construction. We hauled couches, put up plastic, and prepared to leave the spaces we once knew. We said goodbye to things that once were, but now we worship with an accessible entrance, an elevator, an accessible restroom, and more ways for people to participate fully. It took generosity, persistence, and more meetings than anyone wants to remember. But underneath it was a question: What would it take for more of our neighbors to participate fully in this place? And that makes me think about the questions we'll ask and explore together in the months ahead. Early next year, the Council will invite us into small-group conversations about growth, communication, and connection. And the questions are still unknown, but what I do know is that we don't need to arrive with a plan or a fully formed idea. For the Holy Spirit will guide us as we name, notice, and wonder. Together, we will explore where relationships are

taking shape. We will wonder whose stories we haven't heard. We will discover what love might be revealing to us in this time and place.

And maybe that's why I keep coming back to Bishop Christensen's paper leaf: "When the right questions get framed, the reformation begins." Because, perhaps the right question is the one Scripture keeps placing before us: How do we love God and our neighbor as ourselves, right here, right now? And we don't have to answer that question perfectly. For, God's love doesn't depend on it. God has already written God's teaching upon our hearts. Christ has already made us free. And because that love came first, we're free to ask, to notice, and to discover how our questions might become part of the reformation God is already bringing about among us.

A blessed Reformation Sunday to you all. Amen.