



## Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene      The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Ruth 1:1-18](#)

[Psalm 146](#)

[Hebrews 9:11-14](#)

[Mark 12:28-34](#)

What day is it today?

Yes, it's Halloween! Actually, by full name, it's All Hallows Eve. The day before one of the most important holy days in the Church – All Saints' Day, the Feast of All Saints. As you see, I wore a silly hat in keeping with a day when people dress up in wild costumes. As I wrote in our newsletter, Halloween joins with All Saint's Day and All Souls' Day as three days when we recognize and open ourselves more fully to our connection with those who have died and with all the world of spiritual beings. Halloween is a festive time to make light of (and even make fun of) the forces of evil, of death, of decay, in the physical and spiritual world – because, as Christians, we know that death does not have the final say, and the devil does not win. As both saints Martin Luther and Thomas More wrote, the devil is a proud spirit and cannot endure to be mocked. So laugh in the face of wickedness, of evil – humor is a gift of God.

Now, today is also an important day marked in another way in the history of the Church. Today is Reformation Day. In Lutheran and Presbyterian churches around the world, October 31<sup>st</sup> (or the Sunday closest to it, before All Saints' Day) is Reformation Day, a day of remembering the beginnings of important Protestant reforms in the Church, when Martin Luther wrote his ninety-five theses (or principles and values) and nailed them to the church door where he served.

We don't usually mark Reformation Day in most Episcopal and Anglican churches as a day of major importance, even though we are a Church tradition that came out of the Reformation. That is because we have a unique relationship with the Reformation. Even though early reformers in England were quite drawn to the teachings and efforts of Martin Luther and John Calvin, there were many in the English Church who wanted to remain Catholic. Henry VIII, famous as one who began the Church of England by separating it from the oversight authority of the Pope in Rome, was at first hailed by the Pope and Rome as "Defender of the Faith" because he wrote and acted strongly against the Reformation. But his motivation for separating was because as a monarch he did not like having oversight from a foreign place over the life of faith of his people – and especially over his own life. Like other European rulers before him from time to time, he asked for a divorce and annulment of marriage. But for partly political reasons, the Pope would not grant him this, and so Henry claimed local authority over the Church of England instead and proceeded with his divorce.

Now, Henry kept the English Church close to Catholic tradition, but moved in the direction of having the Bible and Prayerbook available in English – in the language of the people. And in his last years and in subsequent years under other monarchs, the Church of England ping-ponged back and forth between intense movements toward Reformation and toward traditional Catholicism. It took decades – over a century – for the Church of England to settled more or less into a place of middle ground, beginning with Queen Elizabeth and culminating in the mid- to late 1600s. This middle ground has been called the *via media*, the "Middle Way." Imagine it as a wide highway that cuts through the dividing lines between Roman Catholic and Reformation Churches, seeking to bring a unifying path that embraces as much as possible of both while rejecting excesses of both. We often call ourselves "fully catholic and fully reformed." (I think that sounds much better than the catch-phrase, "Catholic Lite" – and it's more accurate).

So, why might Reformation Sunday be important for us to remember? Because it is part of our story. And because reform, change, confession of error and openness to transformation, is all part of who we are. Yes, we hold the deep traditions of the Church through the ages, rooted in the scriptures, the creeds, and the sacraments. And we hold ourselves to the unity – the catholicism (small c, meaning universal unity) of the Church across the world. But we also hold to the value of seeking truth and adhering as closely to the teachings of Jesus as possible – and when we find that

the Church has been in error or wandering off course, recently or for centuries, we seek to change in order to be more true to the faith and to following Jesus.

And, here is the tension for us, and the tension in a much bigger way for the whole of Christian faith across the world in its many expressions. You can even see how this tension is found in political life, and in the life of religions and social movements and organizations around the world. The tension is between Reforming versus Remaining Together – between pursuing what we believe is Purer Truth versus what we believe is fuller Unity.

Both of these are incredibly important values for us to uphold and pursue. We want to be living and seeking what is right and good, and true to the heart of the Gospel. We also want to be living in harmony and seeking the beauty of life together, knowing we share core ways of seeing, believing, and living as a community united around the Gospel.

But you can see the tension between these that can arise, right? Because each of these values can get over-emphasized, mutated, and twisted out of shape. There is potential for sin and error in both.

Over-emphasis on truth can become self-righteous indulgence – it can become about “my truth,” and the message can then become “my way or the highway.” We know folks who have encountered such churches and leaders, who end up stressing loyalty to their own tightly wound sense of purity and truth. Pursuing truth can invite separatism and exclusion, and can too easily become an individualistic thing where I know the truth and you don’t, I am right and you are wrong, I have special insight beyond the rest of you.

But what about unity, universality, and community? Over-emphasis on these can become a restrictive kind of uniformity, where no insights or ways of being and living outside the accepted pattern for everyone are tolerated. Unity can become its own restriction. We see some churches and leaders stress this kind of conformist language and thinking to a point that it becomes oppressive. And over-emphasis on unity can then keep us from questioning, seeking deeper truth, examining our accepted patterns.

Today’s scriptures are wonderful for this day of Halloween, but even more for this day also known as Reformation Day. Because they stress what is absolutely most central to our life as seekers of God, as followers of Jesus.

From the Gospel of Mark, the question comes to Jesus from someone who is watching religious leaders argue about right beliefs and values and actions. The question is, “What is the greatest and most central and unifying commandment?” The question is, What is most important to God? What does God call us to, what is God’s greatest desire for us?

The most central is the great commandments. We hear them every Sunday at our 8:00 a.m. service, and we hear them coming back to us in our confession of sin and our calls to holy life throughout all our worship services.

The most central thing is love.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Love God with your whole being, with everything you’ve got. And the second command is just like it – “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love those around you at least as much as you love yourself.

In his book, *Love is the Way*, our presiding bishop Michael Curry notes that the kind of love we are called to give is not just some sentimental thing. Love is not just a sentiment. Any of you who are married or have raised children and teens know this. Any of you who have worked alongside all sorts of colleagues and with all sorts of people in work that you consider important know this. Love is not just a gushy feeling or a warm tingle. True love is a devotion, a total alignment, a full and whole-hearted giving of myself, of yourself, of ourselves together. True love is found in how we adapt and change for others’ sake, how we sustain attitude and action consistently for others’ sake – and how we set ourselves aside and let God and others be the center of the universe instead of ourselves.

This kind of love can feel depleting. Yes, when we give lovingly to the world around us, we find ourselves fed and enriched by the experience, and we find love coming back to us. But it is still effort – and it can be exhausting, if we rely solely on finding the loving energy within ourselves. We are able to love in this committed, whole-hearted way, with

persistence, because (as the scriptures say) “It is not I but Christ in me” (Galatians 2:20) – it is the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and flowing between us that empowers us to love in this way. And it is only when we recognize how much Christ loves us, giving fully for each one of us and for every person – it is only when we allow ourselves to experience just how much Christ loves us that we find ourselves saying, “Oh, I want to offer that kind of love to others and help them find this love of God that changes everything.” As the scriptures say, “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is a story of this kind of devoted, self-aligning, self-giving love. If you get a chance in the next weeks, read the book of Ruth. We will touch on Ruth again in two weeks. It is a beautiful story of devoted care for one another, even across national boundaries and identities. Naomi and her husband Elimelech leave their Hebrew country during a famine to live in the neighboring country of Moab. Their two sons who came with them grew to adulthood there, and married two women of Moab. First Elimelech died, and because wealth and ownership in the middle-eastern world at that time passed to males in the family and couldn't be inherited directly by women, Naomi became dependent on her sons and daughters-in-law. But then, after a time, both of Naomi's sons died. Imagine – now, we have three women widowed and left without protection or care. Naomi had no choice as a foreigner in Moab but to return to her home country of Israel, where the famine had ended. Orpah and Ruth, her daughters-in-law, went with her. But Naomi told them to return to their own families, where they would have the security of being taken in and cared for. This was a loving act in itself – to care enough for her daughters-in-law to be willing to make the journey alone back to her homeland. But these three women really loved each other, and Orpah and Ruth refused to leave. Then, eventually, Orpah chose to return to her own family and people – a fine and worthwhile choice in itself, and we don't see Orpah again because this is not her story. There are many choices in life that are not between good and evil or even between less-good and more-good. Orpah made a fine and honorable choice. But Ruth remains absolutely and completely devoted to Naomi, aligns herself and her future with Naomi's, and gives herself fully to being part of Naomi's life. “Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.”

The story continues with Naomi and Ruth crossing over into Israel homeless and begging, gleaning in the fields after harvest to gather scraps of grain for themselves. But what unfolds in this story is a story of more loving-kindness given and exchanged, so that the owner of the field gives to these women, and then a love story emerges that is full of tender care for everyone involved.

Ruth then becomes the great-grandmother of David, who becomes king of Israel. And Ruth becomes an ancestor of Mary and thus of Jesus.

As we open the gates of loving-kindness, as we choose to love in this way of devotion, alignment, and committed giving of ourselves to God and to others, we open gateways for God to bring transformation of the world – maybe not right away, but all in time. Because that is the power of love that flows. That is the power of the God who is always giving!