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Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-40
October 26, 2008

On October 31, 1517, 491 years ago, Martin Luther didn't dress up to go trick-or-treating. He went to the door of the Wittenberg Church. He nailed 95 theses on that door. Ninety-five arguments against the Church. Ninety-five suggestions on how the Church had lost its way and needed to recover its true identity. Ever since then, the last Sunday in October we celebrate as Reformation Sunday, not just because reformation happened a long time ago. Reformation had begun before Luther came around. In the year 1206, St. Francis went to a church called San Damiano. He prayed day after day after day before the crucifix. Finally, one day the crucifix, Jesus spoke to him from the cross and said, "Francis, as you see, my Church is falling into ruin. Go and rebuild it."

There is always the task that we have before us to rebuild the Church, to reform the Church. I don't know why the Church always needs this. It may be because, I don't know, we're on some shaky foundations, aren't we? I mean, who have we got at church? You know, sinners, hypocrites. They're just not at the other services, they're here, too. It's you and me.

When I was in college, I took physics my freshman year, and you learn these laws of thermodynamics. The second law of thermodynamics applies, which is entropy increases in a closed system. If you don't remember what that means, don't do any work to your house for about 10 years and see what it looks like. Chaos just ensues. In a closed system, chaos reigns. And in a church, before we know it, it's a mess around here. There's just chaos. We wind up losing our way.

How do we find our way back to the Church that God has called us to be? We could have meetings, we could have strategies, we could read a lot of books. Sometimes we see somebody doing it right, and it helps us tremendously. I got back last night from a meeting in Washington D.C. While I was there, I went to see Alisa Lasater, our former associate pastor who left in June to become pastor of Capitol Hill United Methodist Church. My meeting was actually near her church, and she told me how to walk over there. So as I got there, we met in the yard, embraced, "Oh, good to see you." And at about this time, this voice pierces, "Alisa!" And we turn around and there's this homeless guy in a broken-down old wheelchair, and she knows his name, and he is with this white guy who turns out to be a very successful attorney in D.C. who knows his name, and the homeless guy knows his name. He's a member of Alisa's church, so we go over there, and there's the white, successful attorney and there's Alisa and there's the homeless guy and there's me. And we visit for a while, and then Alisa says, "Let us pray." Now I've gone to Washington to a meeting, and here I am standing outside holding hands with a homeless guy, praying, and since it was Alisa praying, you know she prayed at length. It's funny. Right before she said, Let us pray, I'm holding hands, he looks up at me and he says, "I apologize to you Reverend, I don't smell very good." And he did not. He did not. Maybe that's what Church ought to be like. We go out of the building, we find somebody who's hurting, some people who are different and we just form a little circle and we hold hands and we talk to God for a while.

I heard a sermon recently that talked about a beautiful image of the Church and how to reform the Church. It began by saying people talk a lot about AA as a good model for church. You know if you go to an AA meeting, you don't say, "I'm fine, how are you?" "I'm fine, too." That's not what goes on at an AA meeting. An AA meeting, you go in and you say, "I'm an alcoholic, I've got a big problem." And everyone else has a problem, too, and you love each other and you support each other to deal with the problems that you have. This preacher said he's tired of hearing about this image for church, he's got a better one. And his image for church is Home Depot. Then he tells about this project. He's working on a project in his house, he's got everything kind of torn up and it's not going the way that he thought it would. He doesn't have the tool or the part that he needs and doesn't really know what he's going to do to try to finish this renovation project within his house, so he said, "I decided to go to Home Depot." He said, Now when I decided to go to Home Depot I had sawdust in my hair, I had grime all over my clothes, I smelled bad. Before I went to Home Depot, I did not take a shower and put on a coat and tie. Have any of you ever been to Home Depot? I'm getting some blank looks on faces. Are you paying somebody to do this kind of stuff? The preacher said, You know, I don't get dressed to go to Home Depot, you just go the way you are. You're a mess, and you're sweaty and you're gross and you've got sawdust in your hair, and he said, But it's OK, because when you get to Home Depot you know that in there they've got what you need. And you don't even have to know where to find it. He said, all you do is, you wander in and you look kind of lost and one of the guys in the orange aprons will have mercy on you and will help you. Then his best line I thought was this: He said, the only people at Home Depot who look clean and neat are the people that haven't started their projects yet.

We get into this as Christians, we look all clean and neat, but let me suggest to you that if we're clean and neat maybe we haven't really started our projects yet. You get involved in your project, you find yourself like the homeless guy I held hands with, a little grimy, a little messy, the sawdust in your hair. But you don't have to take a shower, you don't have to put on a coat and tie. You just wander in and you hope that the guys with the orange aprons...Who are they? Well maybe it's people in the church, maybe it's the writers of Scripture, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Paul, John, Luke, James, the brother of Jesus. Maybe they're the ones who take mercy on you and tell you how to reform your life and tell us how to reform the Church. Maybe to reform the Church we think of, like a Home Depot, or maybe we pay attention to the newest members that we just welcomed into our Church today.

I love the reading from First Thessalonians. First Thessalonians is interesting. When Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonians, there was no New Testament. And in fact, nothing that eventually landed in the New Testament had been written yet. First Thessalonians is the earliest scrap of the New Testament that we have. The year is 48 A.D., Paul has been to Thessaloni. Boy, he had a hard time there. He came and preached the Gospel, then riots were touched off and they threw him out of town. The same thing had happened to him when he was Philippi before he went to Thessalonii. He writes a letter back to the Christians there and he expresses his great love for them. It's always about love at the end of the day, isn't it?

Jesus said, "Not you shall build big institutions, but you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Maybe that's

where the reform of the Church can happen. Fredrick Buechner one time said that maybe the best thing that could happen to the Church would be for some great tidal wave of history just to sweep it all away; the buildings, the bulletins, the budgets, the denominational stuff. He said then all we'd have left would be Jesus and each other. He said that's all there was in the first place, Jesus and each other. And when it's just Jesus and each other, we pay a special attention to the youngest members of our church, the children, the infants.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, there's a fascinating word in there that caught my eye in preparing for this sermon. Paul's talking to the Thessalonians, he says this very strange thing. He says, I was gentle when I was with you, I was gentle when I'm with you. I laughed out loud, because if you'd paid much attention to Paul, he's like not a gentle kind of guy. Paul we would think of as prickly, acidic, opinionated, judgmental, difficult. What are the adjectives to describe? You hope he doesn't live next door to you, although he's the great Apostle Paul. Gentle? He never had a gentle moment in his life. Was he having one with the Thessalonians, saying I was gentle among you? So I decided to look up the original Greek. And I went into the Greek, and sure enough it says, avioi. Paul says, I was avioi, gentle, but then there's a footnote, there's a footnote. I love the footnotes. I look at the footnote, and it turns out, the oldest manuscript of Thessalonians says avioi, gentle, but there are other old manuscripts that instead of avioi, they say...I know you were hoping for a Greek lesson today. Instead of avioi, it says navioi, just one little letter, just a little squiggle in Greek stuck on the front of the word. Well, did the copyists get it wrong and add a squibble, or did somebody leave off the squibble at one time? I would suggest that the little scribble got left off at some point, and what Paul was saying was not avioi, gentle, Paul was saying navioi, which means like an infant. Paul may have said to the Thessalonians, I was like an infant among you. And what would he possibly mean if he said such a thing? You know, sometimes we romanticize infants and children, right? Don't we do this? We say, especially in church, we say, Oh they're so pretty, they're so pure, they're so innocent. They're so honest. They're so grateful. We say all these things. I think who people who talk this way have not personally been around children recently, it seems to me.

Martin Luther, after he touched off the Protestant Reformation, he was a monk at the time, and he decided that the monks could get married. So he married one of the nuns and they started having children. And one day he look around and he and the former nun had six children between the ages of four and 12 in the house, and in his exasperation he said this, "Jesus said that we should become like little children. Dear God, this is too much. Must we become such idiots?" I think he had in mind the incessant screaming, the squabbling..The way children are never convenient. I remember when our children were young, I would go to work and I would think I was being a professional person, and I'd be talking to someone and I'd realize they weren't really making eye contact with me, they were looking at my shoulder, and I hesitated to look, but eventually I would look, and there would be spit-up there. Thank you. I brought that to work with me today. Children.

If Paul says we came to you like infants, we came to you like children, what might he have had in mind? We can't interview him, but I wrote down a few suggestions. Children. One of the things that children do is they ask questions. They ask questions so much that sometimes it's just so annoying. Right? They ask questions, and they ask and they ask and they ask, and they say why, why, why, why? Why? Why? Why? Why! And we want them to say stop

asking why! Children, they ask why. Sometimes in church, people ask why, and we think in church you're not supposed to ask why. We think the Church is the answer place, but actually the Church isn't the answer place, the Church is the question place. In the Church, we're the ones who've got the really good questions. And we don't squash anybody asking why, ever, because we're the why people. We're the ones who see a homeless guy in a broken-down wheelchair and we ask why. We see things in the world that are not right, and we ask why. We have struggles in our lives. We suffer pain. We see those we love suffer. And we think we're not supposed to ask why, we're just supposed to succumb to God's will, but instead we ask why. And we have good authority to do so because when Jesus hung on the cross, he looked up to Heaven and said, "My God, my God, why? Why?" The Church is the place that we ask questions, that we ask why.

Another thing about infants, children, they brook no rivals. They absolutely demand attention. We have baptisms today. This went very smoothly, I would add. I remember when the Howells had their second baptism, second child. She was fine, but the older sister, you know we see this sometimes. The older sister was throwing things, she just would have attention. It was not her day, it was her sister's day, but she demanded attention. Children must have attention. How should we say it? The Church has got to figure out how to demand attention. The world out there is not waiting with baited breath to see what the Church has to say or what the Church is going to do next. Out there, people think of the Church as irrelevant, and innocuous, with nothing to say to anything that matters. It's why we as a Church speak out on controversial issues. It's why we as a Church try to address the hard questions that people have out there. We get dinged about this periodically, but what is the option? What is the option for the Church? Say we'll just be invisible, we'll just be irrelevant, we'll never ruffle anybody's feathers? No, Paul says, I came to you as a child. And children demand attention. They demand a hearing. We've got to figure out how to immerse ourselves in the world and to demand a hearing on behalf of God. There is a God and God would be heard about in our world. Children, how should we say it, they know how to shed tears right out in the open... They do not wait until they are alone. They do not attempt to comfort themselves. They do not pretend they are not hurting. When they're in a place of discomfort, they just cry out loud, right wherever they are. They don't really care who comes up and puts their arm around them to comfort them.

Brothers and sisters, we live in difficult times. We live in painful times. And apart from the times, we lead painful lives. Our hearts get broken. We love people that we lose. We have much to fear. Why in the world do we decide that Church is the place where we come and, not like Home Depot, where we dress up and we smile and when people ask how are we doing, we lie through our teeth and we say fine, fine. Paul says we came to you like children. Maybe the Church to be the Church needs to know how to cry, to express our sorrow, to figure out how to comfort each other. Paul says we came to you like children.

Having children is hard, and you have to make a lot of difficult choices. When Lisa and I began this gambit of having children, it was interesting, the times we loved to go to movies and we loved to eat out and we loved to take long bike rides out in the country and we loved to jump in the car and go out of town on a whim, and this was our life. And we had discretionary money, and it just seemed lovely. And children, man, children really, they just ruin a good time, now don't they? See, if you're going to have a child, if you're going to be at all decent as a parent,

you've got to make some choices. You've got to make some sacrifices. You've got to do without some stuff that you thought was just jolly fun for the sake of the child. Let me suggest to you that Church is always like that. For us to think about what God is calling us to do, especially during hard times. See the times are hard, and everybody wants it to get better quickly. You know, the government, do something. Do something. Do something so the stock market is back at \$15,000 by Tuesday morning at the latest. Thank you very much. Make the economy better, now. Let me suggest to you that it might not be the worst thing for us to go through a difficult time. When you go through a difficult time, you have to think. You have to focus. You have to lean on each other. You have to sort through what matters and what doesn't really matter. You realize how maybe fat and sassy you might have been, you didn't mean to be, it just snuck up on you. In hard times you have to prioritize. You have to think about what's going to cost me something, but it's worth it because it matters. It's the one thing in my heart that's really something. Hmm?

Paul says, We came to you like children, and he adds the following language. He said, We never flattered you. Children never, ever flatter you. You know I would rock my children in the middle of the night, you know, it's like 2 in the morning, they've got colic, you're doing this number...I would do that, and you know, my children never looked at me and said, Wow, you're a wonderful dad, thanks for doing this. They don't do that. They're just the recipients of your largess.

I love the prayer that Bill Roth prayed last week over the offering. If you were here, I hope you paid attention to it. We brought the offerings up, Bill said this, "Lord, let this offering go where we cannot go. Let this offering communicate what we cannot speak. Let this offering touch lives we will never know." It's part of what goes on in the Church, isn't it?

Brothers and sisters, now is the time for the Church to be reformed. I think the reformation begins. We begin to think of ourselves like children. When we don't get all clean and neat and think we're supposed to have everything together, but we've got the sawdust in our hair, we're a little grimy, we're a little smelly. We don't get cleaned up first, we just reach out to a brother, to a sister in Christ, we reach up to God. We love. We love. It's not the buildings, it's not the bulletins, it's not the institution. It's the love. God loves us. We love each other. And because God loves us and we love each other, we can't help getting out of here and loving somebody else, and then somebody else loves God and we love each other, and the Church is reformed. The Church discovers its true self. The Church is rebuilt. It's love.