

Reformation Day is actually October 31 because that was the date in 1517 when a little known priest named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses or criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church to the parish door in Wittenberg, Germany.

This morning, I'd like to engage in theological and playful contemplation about the similarities between the Reformation and another celebration that also takes place on October 31. But first, in light of our observance of the Reformation, I offer this prayer from John Calvin: *O Lord, as you are giving light to this world by the rays of the sun, so enlighten our minds by the effulgence of your Spirit, that we may be guided in the way of your righteousness through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

“Effulgence” means to shine brightly, but when describing a person, including a person of the Trinity, it means to emit joy. Martin Luther's legacy extends beyond his criticism of church abuses, as he also aimed to revitalize the ancient faith in his own time and place. Reformation of any kind often involves hard work and sacrifice, but the goal is joy.

Turning to our scripture from Philippians, we saw last week how this letter sings of joy, and Paul understood that joy is experienced through example. The Apostle knew there were ministers who were primarily concerned with their own interests. (Luther thought the same, by the way.) But Paul sent Timothy and Epaphroditus to the ancient church as models of care and compassion. They served with joy. In these servants of the good news, the Philippians could see an embodiment of the teachings of Paul and, even more importantly, a similarity to Christ. Joy to the world; the savior reigns!

The Reformation theologians insisted that God is still sending us speakers, writers, translators, teachers, and exemplars. This is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, or, as we say at Chapel in the Pines, every member is a minister. John Calvin, the Protestant reformer with whom Presbyterians more closely identify, promoted the mystical idea that we minister in Christ's name by putting on his teachings like clothes.

Again, this meant sacrifice and service, and also the effulgence of your spirit, that is, joy. Being clothed in Christ brings me to another costume-wearing event.

On Halloween, I've never seen a child dressed as Martin Luther or John Calvin, but you likely have a picture in mind of dour-faced, stern-looking gentlemen clutching their Bibles. But how would you envision the appearance of a person who spoke these words? "The world is a theater of God's glory. There is not one blade of grass, not one color in the world, not intended to make us rejoice." John Calvin said that—John Calvin!!

Therefore, we might interpret Halloween as more than just sugar consumption. As a theater of God's glory, Halloween might bring joy to children and those feeling like children at heart.

I'd like to believe that our work as people of faith is less about cranky opposition to everything in the larger culture, as if we alone are possessors of the truth. Jesus was hardest on those who had cloaked themselves in their self-righteousness. To do so is to make God in our own image and also negatively impact how we see others. In the words of Anne Lamott, we can be certain that we have created an idol if God despises all the same people that we do.

What would it look like to be curious about the culture around us? To be open to others and look for joy? After all, we believe that it is God in whom we live, move, and have our being. It stands to reason that the culture presents a shimmer of something vast (Brian Doyle). The world deserves all the attention and the wonder that we can muster (Marilynne Robinson), and perhaps especially in times when wonder feels hard to come by.

This year is an election year, and we are all aware of the political divisions in our society, which reflect and reinforce deeper divisions of class, race, gender, and more. We should not smooth over these real differences in the name of maintaining the status quo. But on Halloween, the simple words "Trick or treat!" cross those divisions.

From this perspective, we could view Halloween as a sacramental glimpse, symbolizing a visible manifestation of invisible grace. It is characterized by

homes adorned with lights and decorations, open doors welcoming visitors of all ages, a spirit of wit and excitement permeating the air, and children receiving sweet gifts without question, or perhaps with the gentle question, "And who are you dressed up as?"

The right questions may be more faithful than claiming to have all the answers. One of the things that I admire about John Calvin was that he could make distinctions between what was a first-order concern (a hill to die on) and other important, but perhaps second- or third-order issues, which could be addressed with more patience and open dialogue. Luther, like hammering his theses into the church door, tended to impose his views, whereas Calvin was able to appreciate nuance and mutual forbearance, which is a willingness to accept differences.

Reformation thinkers, particularly Presbyterian-led efforts in the twentieth century, have been fundamental in shaping the modern ecumenical and interfaith peace movement, seeking dialogue with the Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as alliances with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and more. It's not about conversion but conversation. We can afford to differ in certain theological concepts while still forging alliances.

The real work lies in reformation, which is the process of transforming our society. Many religions, philosophies, worldviews, and cultures teach us to love our neighbors as ourselves, despite the fact that individuals may not share the same thoughts or viewpoints. What does look like, then, to approach the work of reformation as clothed in Christ?

My favorite part of trick-or-treating is watching adults pretend to be frightened by scary costumes, distribute extra candy, and lose themselves in laughter, transforming themselves into children—transformation a wry rabbi once described as the key to the kingdom and the sacred wondrous magic on any given night.