

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Spooky"  
Dr. J. Dent

October 31, 2010  
Reformation Sunday

The scariest thing about today is not my ability to imitate a Transylvanian accent. (try to do so) Nor is it my ability to talk like Stuart McLean. The scariest thing is our cultural memory loss.

We've mostly forgotten the things we used to do to make Sunday a special day for God to speak into our lives. I know there used to be an overemphasis on rest and honouring Sunday as the Lord's Day. Some of you have told me the excesses your parents went to to make sure you would honour the holy day. Now we have come around to making Sunday just another day. I'm not just talking about shopping. Those wars are over. But somehow we've forgotten that Sunday is different. Now I know you are here and perhaps proving the opposite of my point, but I am talking about the culture in general. There was a time when going to church was the majority position, but those days are gone.

If we go back a bit further in history, we have to admit that we've forgotten All Saints Day, but have remembered Halloween. And I love a party as much as the next guy, in fact, I can say that I have enjoyed dressing up on occasion. But we rarely teach on Halloween because people might be offended if we say what see as a rapidly growing anti-Christian holiday that celebrates evil, the demonic, death and the horror genre from movies in all its gore. My scariest recollection of displays around Halloween was on the surgical ward at one of the hospitals in BC which had a graveyard, ghost and goblins at the Nurses' station. This was the place you had to pass in order to see your loved one who just came out of surgery, or didn't. It was insensitive at best, but it was culturally acceptable.

So we try to talk about Reformation Day on this day, because this is the season, in fact it is this very day in 1517 when Martin Luther placed his 95 theses on the Wittenberg door. To summarize what he wrote on that paper and placed it on that door: "The (95) theses affirm that penance implies repentance, not priestly confession; mortification of the flesh is a useless exercise unless accompanied by inward repentance, the merits of Christ alone avail for the forgiveness of sins, penances and works prescribed by the church have validity only insofar as they proclaim and confirm the divine

pardon; the real 'treasure of the Church' is the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ." [Ian Sellers, *The 95 Theses*, *the New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*]

These things are not nearly as pressing as they were five hundred years ago, when the Church was selling salvation, what were called "indulgences" in those days. The Church rarely if ever read from Scripture and of course only offered services in a language few knew or understood. Martin Luther's *sola fide, sola gratia and sola Scriptura*, faith alone as the way to God, grace alone as the way to God, and the Scriptures alone as the way to God were ways to help the Church get back on track with the central message of the Gospel. Calvin used the phrase *Christus Solus*, Jesus Christ alone is the way to salvation and to all the things of God. Many received this at the time. Many did not. And although history is not my strongest subject, I still wonder whether we care less about the Church and its history than we do about children coming to the door for candy. Is that too strong a wording? How much do we love the Lord and how much do we want to review what we have always done to consider something new? Now there's a spooky question.

The scary thing today is that we feast and celebrate often without asking why we do. It is good to be able to talk to neighbors on our streets, and perhaps even have people in who we wouldn't normally even talk to, as long as we actually do talk together. But the rest of the year, it is the sects, the JW's and the Mormons who go door to door with their peculiar spiritual messages. Perhaps we can take back October 31 in some way. I wonder how we might do this. Do you have any ideas?

One thing that I believe is not an option for us who are serious about our faith is to simply go along with the evolution of this day, to join in the celebration of evil, of horror, of terror. The children's book I read points us to help each other and pray with each other about our fears and anxieties. This would certainly be in line with the opposite spirit of the day.

John Calvin, one of the reformers, desired to change all of society around to God's ways and will. Geneva in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe was his testing ground. Much went well in that experiment. He helped to establish universal education for the young, reforming laws to be more humane, caring for the poor and elderly, ideas that were new and unheard of in that day. These

were ideas that would become the basis of western civilization, or at least something we currently take for granted.

Five hundred years later, we don't really know what will happen to Reformed Christianity, that is the Christian Reformed faith from its Dutch roots, the Presbyterian and Free Church faith from its Scottish roots, the Congregationalist faith in its English roots, the Evangelical Covenant Church from Sweden, the Huguenots from France, the Puritans from England and the new United States, often maligned and misunderstood today. We don't really know whether this great church movement is finished. We've had our five centuries to do what we can in the world. Perhaps it will only be the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and the Pentecostals world wide who will be the most influential of Christian groups.

Meanwhile, there are literally hundreds and hundreds of Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, not congregations, denominations across the face of the earth today, on every continent. There are 96 denominations of Presbyterianism just in Korea alone today. Most Christians in Korea today are Presbyterian. I have a 700+ page book called *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools and International Organizations*. This book is ten years old, but it is amazing how much of the church worldwide traces its roots to the Reformation. Of course, all of Protestantism does to some degree, but now is not the time to teach my University church history course.

This is simply to be aware of our identity within the body of Christ, and within the world today. The hardest part is putting together the content of our faith, the practices of our culture, and the personal needs around us together in such a way so that we can be confidently and boldly Christian, followers of Jesus, in a culture and world which is going generally in a different direction. And so we are counter-cultural and the impact of that counter cultural identity comes on days like today, when boys and girls go out into the community, and adults choose some kind of sweet or salt or tooth brushes or Gospel tracts to hand out.

We constantly are being challenged to live out the Sermon on the Mount. To give to those who beg. To do to others as you would have them do to you. To deal with our losses, our suffering, the persecution of our faith, violence, changing mores, right and wrong.

I trust we will be able to transform our culture and our little circle of friends as we seek to influence others with the Gospel that we believe and hold to be essential and true. If we give this up, we have nothing left but a social group that may or may not continue long. But God has been gracious to us as a congregation for these two centuries and thirty five years. We will be celebrating this in three weeks time on Nov. 21. I trust that this has some meaning for you. I don't know. We will have an extended coffee hour and a multi media presentation at that time.

We have much to be thankful for. Let's not forget who we are, on this day, or any day. Let's struggle together to put our faith and our practice together on days dedicated to the opposite of who we are and everyday.

Let us pray.