Proper 25 (30) - October 25, 2026 Reformation Sunday

- Deuteronomy 34:1-12 - Psalm 1 - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 - Matthew 22:34-46

"The Greatest Commandment"

1. Today is Reformation Sunday, which is the day when we remember our roots within the 2000 years of the Christian church, and remember what is unique about us.
    a. But before Church history makes your eyes glaze over, let me tell you a story.
        i. You have probably seen in movies, read in books or maybe even visited convents and monasteries in Europe and the Middle East
        ii. They offer a very specific way to live out one's faith.
        iii. There were different religious orders leading those monasteries and convents
        iv. Basically, it was where people called by God to service and prayer lived together.
        v. Sometimes that meant the monks and nuns stayed behind those walls praying for the world, other times it meant they ministered out in the world with common folks.
        vi. One of the things that you might picture about monks and nuns is their clothing: a very specific uniform or habit.
        vii. And that is what I want to talk to you about.
        viii. Anthropologist Margaret Mead writes that centuries ago an order of nuns committed to living out their faith through service outside their convent.
            1. The nuns wanted their habit (their clothing) to be so simple and nondescript as to be able to blend in among other people without drawing attention to themselves.
            2. It makes sense to me that they wanted the attention to be on Jesus and on their work in ministry.
            3. But traditions are a funny thing and sometimes we can conserve the wrong thing
            4. Over centuries, the administrators of that convent decided that the priority was to keep the habits looking exactly the same, perhaps so that they would feel a connection to their sisters of 200, 300 400 years earlier.
            5. But you probably are a step ahead of me in realizing that created a problem with how the habit allowed them to blend in at the marketplace and the poor area of town.

6. As fashion changed outside the walls of the convent, the fashion didn't change inside the walls.
7. Now the nuns stood out distinctly because of their clothing, stood out like a sore thumb among the group of people they were helping.
8. They held true to their commitment and their service, but by not changing their clothes they found themselves changed.
9. It's not about mindlessly keeping up with fashion trends, but about holding on to their commitment in changing times.
10. They discovered what seemed like a contradiction: that to stay the same, they had to change.

b. Overlapping somewhere in those centuries of nuns in ancient-looking habits, there came a significant movement to reflect on the nature of the Church, capital C.
    i. Some context: after Jesus was raised there came what we have come to call the Early Church, basically a unified movement.
    ii. That split into two main branches in the 1100s, the East and the West.
    iii. The East is the Orthodox Church. The West is based in Rome, so that branch is the Roman Catholic Church.
    iv. Around the 1500s, some faithful Catholic theologians and priests were asking some very difficult questions challenging some of the traditions and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church.
    v. There were quite a few issues being raised, and the German priest Martin Luther wrote 95 problems he had with how the Church understood forgiveness of sins.
    vi. Luther wanted to have a debate with church higher ups about this and he nailed a paper with these issues to the door of a church.
    vii. But as sometimes happens when those in power are called out, they simply use their power to kick Luther out of church and excommunicated him.
    viii. Luther's idea wasn't meant to start a new church or denomination, but that's what it led to since he was kicked out.
    ix. This historical period is called the Reformation, which led to the beginning of today's Lutheran church. Also in the 1500s are the roots of today's Presbyterian church when a French catholic lawyer, John Calvin picked up the movement of Reformation.
    x. Even as the Catholic Church pushed out those who didn't agree with it, the Catholic Church itself underwent a Counter Reformation,

which is to say they did make some changes after being challenged, as they have continued to do since

xi. All that to say: Reformation Sunday is not about bashing on our Roman Catholic siblings, but it does acknowledge that at some point Protestant reformers were asking that the Church go back to the basics, to how things were in the Early Church, shortly after Jesus.

xii. Here Calvin and Luther were arguing basically what the nuns discovered about their habits.

1. Let's go back in our beliefs and practices to the time of Jesus, to the way things used to be in the early church
2. Let's go to the root of our faith while staying connected to the current realities of life
3. Several hundred years later we, the Presbyterian Church, take that mindset and describe ourselves in this way: **Reformed, always reforming**. Meaning God continues to reform us!
4. We hold to what God shows us as central, as God also shines new light on what it means to follow Jesus today.

2. Speaking of which, we get to see Jesus addressing what is central to a life of faith
    a. This morning's Gospel conversation between Jesus and the teachers should have been about agreeing on the foundations of faith
    b. But instead it was the teachers trying to catch Jesus answering something incorrectly, so they could have the grounds to kick him out
    c. As I said, sometimes when the powerful are questioned, they kick out those troublemakers like Jesus who dare to stand up to them
    d. The response Jesus gives about the greatest commandment actually doesn't break new ground.
    e. Jesus is actually going "to the beginning" as well, quoting the scriptures, and what's more, answering the same question as had been answered by several other famous rabbis in earlier centuries.
    f. "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"
    g. Jesus wasn't trying to start something new. His teachings were meant to challenge, to reform, to recenter the religious establishment as it stood then.
    h. Jesus was teaching them that they had strayed from and needed to stay true to their roots in God while staying faithfully relevant.
3. On this one Sunday of the year, we affirm that we as Presbyterians are "Reformed and always Reforming."

    a. The story of the nuns and their habits reminds us that being the church reformed and always reforming isn't about keeping up with trends, but it means revisiting our root convictions and refreshing them for this moment in history, for the challenges of today
    b. Calvin reminds us that we are not the ones doing the reforming, but rather it is God who continually reforms us, reshapes us
    c. That has happened historically. The Church called out as evil: slavery, the oppression of women, the refusal to see LGBTQ+ people as children of God.
    d. So being reformed means being faithfully attentive to how God is continually shaping and reshaping us, especially when that makes some uncomfortable because in the memorable words of church the world over: "We've never done it that way before!"
4. We are reformed and always reforming. We follow God by doing what Jesus told us to do (at times in new and unexpected ways): Love God. Love your neighbor. It's that easy, and it's also that hard.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-7