Engage

October 25, 2026

There is something wonderfully appropriate about celebrating Reformation Sunday with a Gospel reading in which Jesus takes religious leaders to task. Not exactly the warm, fuzzy, everybody-feels-good sort of Sunday morning scripture!

Jesus is frustrated with the scribes and Pharisees. Not because they take their faith seriously, but because they have confused taking their faith seriously with having all the answers. They know the rules. They know the traditions. They know how to tell other people what to do. They are quite comfortable occupying positions of honor and authority. But somewhere along the way, they've lost sight of what all that religious knowledge is supposed to be for.

“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,” Jesus says, “and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”

In other words, they've become much more interested in preserving the institution than practicing the faith.

Which brings us to the Protestant Reformation.

Over five hundred years ago, Martin Luther challenged the authority of the church, questioned its teachings and practices, and insisted that the church had strayed from the heart of the gospel. His protest wasn't simply about correcting a few bad policies or cleaning up some institutional problems. It was about recovering something essential: the idea that the church must continually measure itself against the teachings and example of Jesus.

Martin Luther and the other reformers changed Christianity forever. But perhaps one of its most important lessons is that reformation is never finished. The church is always being called to examine itself, to question what it has inherited, to let go of what no longer serves the gospel, and to rediscover what it means to follow Jesus in the world as it actually exists. That includes the church. It includes our individual lives. It includes our politics and our public life.

Last week, I came across something written by Pastor Joe Smith, who leads Shift Church in Gainesville, Florida. It's a list of convictions about what matters, what the church ought to stand for, and what it means to take Jesus seriously in the world today that he called, “The Hills I'll Die On Now That I'm Over the Hill.”

Some of these hills probably won't surprise anyone here. But I think they're worth hearing, and worth considering, because they offer a pretty good measure of whether we're actually living the faith we profess. Smith writes:

LGBTQ+ people do not need to be fixed, changed, tolerated, or loved 'despite' who they are. They are fully beloved. Full stop.

Women do not need permission from men to preach, lead, teach, pastor, or make decisions about their own lives and bodies. Patriarchy is not God's design.

Racism is bigger than individual prejudice. It is built into systems, laws, institutions, churches, neighborhoods, schools, policing, and wealth. Pretending it's only about individual bias lets those systems off the hook.

Immigrants are not the enemy. They are our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends, and part of what makes this country stronger. Cruelty, fear, and dehumanization have no place in a Jesus-shaped life or a just society.

Christian nationalism is not Christianity with too much patriotism. It is a bastardization of Christianity. It uses the name of Jesus to pursue power, domination, and control.

Justice is not an optional add-on to the gospel. A faith that has nothing to say about poverty, racism, oppression, violence, exploitation, or who gets crushed by the powerful is useless.

Being an ally quietly is not enough anymore. If we helped build these systems, benefited from them, defended them, preached them, or stayed silent while they hurt people, then it is on us to tear them down.

And perhaps the hill underneath all the others: If it does not look like love, liberation, mercy, justice, and the life of Jesus, we cannot call it Christianity.

That's quite a list. And I suspect there are people in this sanctuary who would be willing to plant a flag on every single one of those hills. But here's what I find especially important about Smith's reflection. He doesn't present these convictions as a list of political positions or a collection of fashionable opinions. He presents them as the result of a lifetime of wrestling with what it means to follow Jesus.

And that's where the Reformation comes in.

The question isn't simply whether we believe the right things. It's whether we're willing to keep examining what we believe, why we believe it, and what our beliefs produce in the world. Are we willing to be reformed? Are we willing to recognize that some of the things we were taught about God, about other people, about ourselves, and about the world might be wrong? Are we willing to admit that some of the traditions we've inherited have done real harm? Are we willing to change our minds when the truth demands it?

That's not a sign of weak faith. It's a sign of a faith that is still alive.

In fact, I'd argue that one of the greatest dangers facing any church is the conviction that it has finally arrived. That we've figured it all out. That we've found the perfect interpretation of scripture, the perfect expression of Christianity, the perfect way of doing church. Jesus seems to have a particular problem with that kind of certainty. Notice that he doesn't tell the crowds and his disciples to stop caring about faith. He tells them not to confuse religious authority with moral authority. Not to put themselves above others. Not to make their faith a source of privilege or power.

"The greatest among you will be your servant," he says. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

That sounds a lot like a call to keep learning. To keep listening. To remain open to the possibility that God might be speaking through someone we haven't been particularly interested in hearing. And it brings us to something else that matters enormously in the days we're living through. This Tuesday is Election Day. There are plenty of reasons to pay attention to the choices we're making as a nation and a community. But here's one I hope we will carry with us into the voting booth: Every single human being bears the divine image of God. Not just the people who agree with us. Not just the people who look like us, worship like us, speak our language, or share our politics. Every single human being.

That means the way we evaluate candidates, policies, and political priorities matters. Do they recognize the dignity of every person? Do they protect the vulnerable? Do they make room for people who have been pushed to the margins? Do they seek the common good, or do they build power by convincing us that some of our neighbors are less deserving of it? Voting is one of the ways we exercise our responsibility to one another. It is one way we put our faith into practice. And we cannot separate the values we proclaim in church on Sunday from the choices we make in the voting booth on Tuesday.

Every person is somebody's beloved child. Every person is somebody God loves. That is not a complicated theological proposition. But it is a profoundly demanding one.

Which brings me, somewhat unexpectedly, to Sir Patrick Stewart, who died this week. Many of you know him as Captain Jean-Luc Picard from “Star Trek: The Next Generation.” What you may not know is the impact that character had on a generation of people who were searching for a place to belong. Rev. Kevin Young recently wrote a beautiful reflection about Stewart's legacy. As a young, closeted boy growing up in a rigid fundamentalist environment, Young found something in Star Trek that he wasn't finding in his church. He found a vision of a world where people could be different and still belong, where questions were welcomed, where truth mattered more than institutional reputation, and where the circle of human dignity was continually being drawn wider.

He found, in a fictional starship crew, people actually practicing the values he heard preached in church.

Consider the episode in which Picard defends Data, an android, against those who want to treat him as property rather than as a person. The question at the heart of the episode is a deceptively simple one: Who gets to decide who counts? Picard insists that the burden of proof belongs to those who would deny another being their dignity and personhood.

Or consider the episode in which Picard confronts a respected admiral whose investigation into possible wrongdoing aboard the Enterprise turns into a witch hunt. The admiral is convinced she is protecting something important. But Picard recognizes that the pursuit of righteousness can become dangerous when it is used to justify suspicion, fear, and the suppression of freedom.

Sound familiar?

In another episode, Picard refuses to let the inhabitants of an alien world worship him as a god. He refuses the privilege of being placed above other people. He insists, in word and deed, that he is just like them. Here, Young draws a connection to Paul's words in Philippians about Jesus, who did not exploit equality with God but emptied himself.

The parallels to our scripture today are hard to miss. A religious leader who demands to be honored, who places burdens on others, who insists on unquestioned authority, has missed the point. A leader who listens, who tells the truth, who recognizes the dignity of others, and who is willing to change course when confronted with a better understanding of what is right? That's a different kind of leadership altogether.

And perhaps that's part of Patrick Stewart's extraordinary legacy. Through a fictional character, he helped people imagine a world more generous, more curious, more compassionate, and more just than the one they were living in. He helped people imagine that the future could be better. Isn't that part of what the church is supposed to do?

Psalm 34 invites us to "taste and see that the Lord is good." Not simply to memorize that God is good. Not simply to recite the right words about God's goodness. But to experience it. To make it tangible. To give people a taste of what God's love looks like when it takes flesh in the world. That's the work of a church that is always being reformed. Not a church that has all the answers, but one that keeps asking the right questions. Not a church that protects its own comfort, but one willing to take risks for the sake of its neighbors. Not a church that draws increasingly narrow boundaries around God's love, but one that keeps discovering just how much bigger that love is than we imagined.

There will always be hills worth standing on. There will always be convictions worth defending, injustices worth confronting, and neighbors worth showing up for. But perhaps the most important commitment we can make is to remain open to being changed by God’s love. To keep listening. To keep learning. To keep widening the circle. To keep measuring our lives, our church, and our public witness against the life and teachings of Jesus.

The Reformation was not the end of a story. It was an invitation to keep writing it. And the future of the church depends on whether we're willing to accept that invitation. So may we be a people who tell the truth, welcome the stranger, stand with the vulnerable, refuse to dehumanize anyone, and never confuse our own power with the purposes of God. May we be a church that is always becoming a little more like the people Jesus calls us to be.

There are strange new worlds to explore, new possibilities to imagine, and a whole lot of work still to do right here on this one.

Let's get to it. Or should I say, “Make it so”?

Alleluia and Amen.

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Psalm 34:1-8; Matthew 23:1-12
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