

“The Church That Keeps Going”
October 26, 2025

John 14:12-17

Today is Reformation Sunday, a time that invites us to reflect on what it means to be Protestant Christians more than 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation, to consider *what* we are and *who* we are and *why* we continue to claim the name of Protestant with pride and purpose.

As one person put it: “The facts of history underscore the necessity of the Reformation. Corruption and the abuse of power inspired courageous Christians, who often paid for their dissent with their lives, to imagine a new and more faithful way of being the church of Jesus Christ.”¹ That, in a sense, is what the Reformation—and being Protestant—is all about: to this day we continue to imagine new and more faithful ways of being the church that God is always calling to account and always reforming.

We don’t stop where we are. We keep going.

Mainline denominations such as the United Church of Christ are descendants of the great Protestant reformers who challenged empires and reordered societies. The tradition we bear has continually fostered important innovation in meeting social needs. This tradition has produced powerful voices of prophetic judgment and has frequently given birth to great movements of moral protest—saying “no” to what is and also saying “yes” to what, by the grace of God, might be.

In an age when so many are quite ready to make absolute claims in the name of Christ, we have all the more reason to announce the classic Protestant beliefs and practices that place healthy restraints on the human tendency to deify political or economic systems or individual leaders. In faith we confess that all systems and all leaders are accountable to a higher authority.

One of the great leaders of the Reformation, John Calvin, reminded us that the human mind is a factory of idols. There is a human tendency to make just about anything sacred—even though it is not God. Recognizing this, Protestants have always been willing to question authority—including the authority of the church and of tradition. As Paul Tillich told us: The “No” of Protestantism is important because it contains the divine and human protest against *any* absolute claim made for a relative reality—even if that claim is made by a Protestant church.²

The “No” of Protestantism is important and sometimes we must speak it loudly.

But Protestantism also has a “Yes.” At our best, we are always looking for new ways of being faithful people in changing times. The result of such faithful searching, it has been said, is that “key Western values came out of the Protestant Reformation—social reform, individual religious conviction, hard work, and the rejection of corruption, hypocrisy, and empty ritual.”³ In these days, when such values are ignored, derided, and threatened, our

task is not only to shore up those values but also to find new ways of expressing our commitments—so that our faith and values effectively address life today.

I think that most of us recognize, however, just how difficult it is to live out this tradition of protest and affirmation. It's easy to get stuck, to stay comfortably where we are instead of faithfully following where God might continue to lead us.

So we constantly need reminders.

This morning we sang a couple of verses from that wonderful hymn based on Pastor John Robinson's farewell sermon to the Pilgrims as they left Holland for England and ultimately for the New World telling them: "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word." We recognize that, in the words of that searing hymn by James Russell Lowell, "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth."

But, again, holding to this understanding and living it out does not always come easily.

In a longer description of Robinson's farewell sermon, we are told that Robinson complained about the Reformed Churches who seemed to think the Reformation had come to an end. Lutherans could not go beyond what Luther saw. "Whatever part of God's will God had further imparted and revealed to Calvin," Robinson said, "Lutherans will rather die than embrace it." At the same time, Calvinists were stuck where Calvin left them. Speaking of those giants, Luther and Calvin, Robinson boldly concluded: "Though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed God's whole will to them; and were they now living, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as the light they had received."⁴

Within one hundred years of Luther's actions that caused a smoldering reformation to burst into flames, the light was already threatened by a calcifying captivity to the past. Robinson reminded the people of their greater calling and encouraged them to keep going beyond the accepted dogmas of the past, whether of the Roman Catholic Church or John Calvin, and to move toward more truth and light.

Within another century, the New England Congregational heirs of the Pilgrims would reject much that was called "Calvinism" and lay the groundwork for a liberal Christian alternative.

More light and truth will break forth.

Or as we describe it in the covenant of our church, we walk together in the "the way of Jesus Christ, known *and to be made known* to us.

As Protestants living out a continuing reformation, we are not embracing change for the sake of change, or simply jettisoning our past for something more convenient and less demanding.

We are following in the way of Jesus Christ that he put before us when he said to his disciples: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact *will do greater works than these*.” Those words are both a challenge and a promise to those who call themselves Christians.

Throughout his ministry Jesus was clear that the work he did was God’s work. In his words to his followers on the night of his arrest, he is just as clear that those who follow him are co-workers with him.

We who follow are included in showing the power and character of God—love, peace, and mercy—in what we do. Indeed, our work is in a sense *greater*, Jesus says, because we announce the whole Gospel story of the Word made flesh, who is both crucified *and* resurrected.

At the beginning of this month, I preached a sermon titled: “How the Good Grows.” Before worship that morning, a member who had looked at the title said that I also needed to preach a sermon about how evil grows.

And I immediately thought of those words: “For evil people to accomplish their purpose, it is only necessary that good people do nothing,” Of course, that makes for a very short sermon. And while it might be a little more complicated, that is indeed how evil grows—by good people doing nothing.

As Protestant Christians, we must create justice and show mercy and compassion. When we fail in these tasks, evil grows.

As we become a more diverse society, and as people are drawn into different special interest groups, the need to care for the public’s life and sense of itself has only become more important. Our task as Protestants is to help our nation and our world see larger realities and value the long-term health and well-being of the whole creation more than the issues that dominate the latest news cycle.

One person put it this way: “The Reformation led to a full embrace of the radical political implications of a humanity created in the image of God—each individual with God-given dignity and value. And as a consequence, it led to political rights, to a new recognition of justice in the civic and political arena, and to a stress on grace as the fundamental word that God has spoken and on gratitude as the essential response for the one who has received grace.”

Our Protestant faith requires that we continue to be involved in the political process. Our faith gives us the tools to make theologically informed political decisions.

As we do this, it helps to recall the image of the early church at Pentecost, where people spoke with “many tongues.”

Many voices, many gifts, one Spirit. Our involvement in the political processes does not mean that a congregation is place of agreement. A congregation is not the place where political consensus is reached among members, nor is it a place where discussion of

political issues is silenced. Rather it is a place where a variety of political positions receive critical theological attention, so individual Christians can become theologically informed citizens. The Reformed idea of the sovereignty of God calls for all to participate in decision-making, and that decision-making, in the church and in the world, should be guided by what is good for all—the common good.

From the beginning, the Christian faith, our following of the resurrected Christ, has been about looking forward, discovering the new truth that God is revealing for our time in every changing age. In spite of our tendency to make an idol of the past and to worship the way things were in any imagined golden age, Reformed Protestant faithfulness to the living Christ turns our ears toward the new truth that God is speaking, it turns our eyes toward the light that shines from the future. We are constantly invited by God to keep going further.

Reformation Sunday is not a time for looking backwards and worshipping our history or enshrining the very human men and women who were our ancestors in faith. We have a past, but we don't live in it. This day—and *these days*—are the time to open ourselves to the ways in which the Spirit of God continues to renew and reform the church in our own time. This day is about our present and our future more than about our past.

Our world and our time require a humble faith. The gift of the Congregational tradition in the United Church of Christ is a form of Christianity uniquely suited to help us negotiate our way in a world where faith matters—as it increasingly does again in our time. We begin and we end our spiritual journey in the majesty and mystery and wonder that is God.

In all of this, we recognize that, as Luther's hymn put it, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing." All our struggles—to love our neighbors, those for peace and justice, our efforts to reduce and eliminate hunger—all our struggles are not losing battles because of God's grace working in us and through us.

"The righteous shall live by faith," the ancient prophet tells us. We come into relationship with God not through our own strength, not by our fine moral character, neither through our wisdom nor our financial well-being. It is by God's grace that a relationship is offered to us and by God's grace that we are able to respond to that offer.

When we realize this—and that's not always easy to do—we begin to relax. Sometimes we try so hard, as if everything depended on us and us alone.

It doesn't.

While it is true that God depends on us and uses us for working in the world, it is God who is at work. Today, Mainline Protestants are experiencing a renewed sense of mission and strength in many places, including in this congregation. Claiming our proud history, we are finding new ways of addressing current challenges as we live by faith.

We live by faith—faith in the God who is our refuge and our strength, a very help in times of trouble.

We are Protestants.

We are the church that keeps going into God's future.

¹ John Buchanan, "Luther's Legacy," *The Christian Century*, 10/17/12, pg. 3.

² Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*

³ Back cover of *Protestants*, by Steven Ozment

⁴ "[Robinson] took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who were come to a period in religion, and would go on no further than the instruments of their Reformation. As, for example, the Lutherans, they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; for whatever part of God's will he had further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them; a misery much to be lamented; for though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living, saith he, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received."