

As we gratefully remember the many blessings You have showered upon Your Church through Dr. Martin Luther, we know that he would protest if he were given any of the glory that belongs *alone* to You, O God. As You began a great *cleansing* reformation of Your *outward* Church by revealing to Your chosen servant that Your righteousness is Your gift to us through faith in Christ, so create clean hearts in us, O God. Restore to us the joy of Your salvation so that we may boldly proclaim You to be our mighty fortress indeed. Amen. (*There's A Prayer for That*, NPH 2017, p. 6)

Then the Levites arose, Mahath the son of Amasai, and Joel the son of Azariah, of the sons of the Kohathites; and of the sons of Merari, Kish the son of Abdi, and Azariah the son of Jehallelel; and of the Gershonites, Joah the son of Zimmah, and Eden the son of Joah; and of the sons of Elizaphan, Shimri and Jeuel; and of the sons of Asaph, Zechariah and Mattaniah; and of the sons of Heman, Jehuel and Shimei; and of the sons of Jeduthun, Shemaiah and Uzziel. They gathered their brothers and consecrated themselves and went in as the king had commanded, by the words of the LORD, to cleanse the house of the LORD. The priests went into the inner part of the house of the LORD to cleanse it, and they brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the LORD into the court of the house of the LORD. And the Levites took it and carried it out to the brook Kidron. They began to consecrate on the first day of the first month, and on the eighth day of the month they came to the vestibule of the LORD. Then for eight days they consecrated the house of the LORD, and on the sixteenth day of the first month they finished. Then they went in to Hezekiah the king and said, "We have cleansed all the house of the LORD, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the table for the showbread and all its utensils. All the utensils that King Ahaz discarded in his reign when he was faithless, we have made ready and consecrated, and behold, they are before the altar of the LORD."

In Christ Jesus, who cleanses us in our Holy Washing, so that we remain true temples of the Lord, in which we are able to worship Him aright - in spirit and in truth, dear fellow redeemed:

When Jesus confronted the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, she wanted to draw a distinction between the worship of the same God by Samaritans and Jews. She pointed out that they worshipped on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria and the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus took her beyond this by saying: "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... true worshippers ... must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus showed His anger at those who pretended to worship Him at the temple at the beginning and end of His public ministry by cleansing out the buyers and sellers, who made His house a den of

thieves. Christ's religion is not tied to a certain location in our world, but found in the hearts of His believers. So on this Reformation Day observance, let us consider the outward cleansing of the Church with the daily cleansing of the Church through repentance and faith and take note that **The Church Needs Ongoing Cleansing Reformations.**

I

Reformed churches have loved to use this Latin phrase "*Ecclesia semper reformanda est*" ("the church is always being reformed"). What they mean is that the Christian church is in constant need of reformation. But some misuse that phrase to assert that the church constantly needs to change its teaching to be relevant to its times. As heirs of the Lutheran Reformation, we reject that idea and stand firmly on God's never-changing Word and its eternal truths as firmly outlined in our Lutheran Confessions. Yet, we can understand the phrase correctly. The outward church is in constant need of self-examination and reformation lest it falls back into the many errors Luther opposed or seemingly new errors that have cropped up since.

The Lutheran Church in America has had reason over the last century to be reformed from some of the innovations that have been introduced. There were those who changed their approach to Scripture declaring the Bible not to be the Word of God, but insisting we need smart "theologians" to tell us what God would say that is contained therein. Or there are those who have thrown out well established practices of the Church going back even further to the ancient Church insisting that copying the big mega churches which attract large numbers is what should be followed. They advocate contemporary worship, which no longer focuses worship on Christ our Savior, but how God is awesome. Yes, God is awesome, but you and I cannot handle God in His bare majesty, we need to be connected to Him through Christ and Him crucified.

King Hezekiah was a faithful King of Judah. Having followed a series of evil idolatrous kings, he by the command of the Lord sought to restore things to the way in which our Lord instructed His Church at the time of King Solomon. Hezekiah followed Ahaz, his father and here is how his wickedness is described: "King Ahaz ... sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, 'Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.' But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel. ... Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God ..., and he shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. In every city of Judah he

made high places to make offerings to other gods, provoking to anger the LORD, the God of his fathers."

What desecration befell the house of the Lord! So when God raises up Ahaz' son, Hezekiah, he seeks to restore the temple and its proper worship among the people of God. Our text speaks of the cleansing, but what follows is the rededication of this house of worship and the proper services were reinstituted. The priestly household, the sons of Levi, took on these tasks and announced to Hezekiah when all was cleansed: "We have cleansed all the house of the LORD, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the table for the showbread and all its utensils. All the utensils that King Ahaz discarded in his reign when he was faithless, we have made ready and consecrated, and behold, they are before the altar of the LORD."

II

The Lutheran Reformation of God's Church is foreshadowed here in our text. Just as Hezekiah came upon a Church defiled with its people directed to worship with false practices, so Luther discovered by "accident" similar conditions. By God's direction through His Word, He led His servant to overthrow the sale of indulgences, assigned acts of satisfaction to make up for sins confessed, the sacrifice of the mass to name just a few. He, again by God's grace, reinstituted the pure, divine teachings in place of the precepts of men. The sacrifice made by our Lord on the cross once and for all was taught in all of its clarity, so that His believers might know with certainty that all their sins are forgiven and that they are dressed before God in the holiness of Jesus, now and forevermore.

Throughout the history of the Church we see other cleansings like this, but in truth we know this needs to happen repeatedly, since it must happen for each one of us believers daily, through repentance and renewed confession of the Lord's full and free salvation for us all. In Jesus' familiar parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in the temple, we may look upon the tax collector as humbly standing before God confessing his sin and trusting in the Lord's mercy as a one-time act. However, we should look upon this humble response before God as a common activity of that tax collector as a regular worshipper of the true God. After all, we assume on the other hand that the Pharisee did his proud routine on a regular basis as well.

Is not the tax collector's worship what you do regularly - formally here in church and privately in your daily devotional life? Luther instructs us in his small Catechism: "*baptizing with water means that the old Adam in us should, by **daily** contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts; and that a new man **daily** come*

forth and arise, ..." This is truly the ongoing personal reformation that takes place in your lives by God's gracious working.

As the baptized in Christ, this personal reformation includes an ever-vigilant watchfulness over what we believe, teach and confess by word and deed and that it is in accord with Christ's religion. It is not a one-time act by us, but daily, hourly, even more.

As already mentioned, our Lord Jesus cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning of His public ministry and again at the end. What does this demonstrate for us? They are bookends of His ministry to underscore how it is that His Church needs ongoing cleansing reformations. Because our Lord calls us sinners to be members of His Church, He knows and so should we recognize, that we continually struggle with our sin. Satan uses this condition found in the flesh of every believer to distort true worship, so that our Savior might be hidden from us and we end up trusting in other things especially ourselves.

You might think the first cleansing of the temple by our Lord would have changed the hearts and actions of those buyers and sellers, but not so! How many times have you been cleansed by God's grace of your pet sins? How many times have you returned to them over which you so often sincerely repented? – shamefully, many!

We celebrate the Lutheran Reformation, but are not tricked into thinking we can live on such gloriously faithful work done over 500 years ago. This work of cleansing the Church is truly ongoing and it always goes on first within each and every heart of individual Christians. We acknowledge this as we sing after the sermon in Rite 2: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." God has truly blessed you with His macro-reformation through His servant, Martin Luther, so that you are blessed in His daily micro-reformation for you personally and all through the blood and righteousness of Jesus, so that by His work alone you are fully and freely saved.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.