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Reformation Sunday 2018: To Eat from the Tree of Life

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

There are no words to suit the lament. The people of God, in a house of prayer on the Lord's Day, at the rite of circumcision and naming for an infant child: only a manifestation of pure evil could desecrate so holy a gathering with such hatred, as occurred right here in our own community yesterday, at Tree of Life Synagogue.

In the face of tragedy, in the face of a rising tide of hatred, violence, and contempt in our country, what can now be said for a commemoration such as Reformation Day — once appropriated as a festival of nationalism, triumphalism, and contempt against Catholics and Jews and all sorts of outsiders.

Germany — 1932. The National Socialists, or Nazis, were neck and neck with the communists in the struggle for the vote for control of parliament. It's easy to forget how polarized Germans were between the extremes of the right and the left — and how an absence of unity created a power vacuum waiting to be filled. The summer was marked by the rise of racial hatred, riots in the streets, and a July election that would give the Nazis a plurality in parliament. The Lutherans — the German Evangelical church — itself was on the cusp, and soon would become, a “Reich Church,” adopting for itself anti-Jewish policies and electing a white supremacist as its bishop.

Sunday, November 6, 1932, was election day; the Nazis would actually lose many seats in parliament this time around before rebounding and taking an absolute hold on power just months later. But November 6, 1932, was also Reformation Sunday, and one pastor, a leader in the resistance, who would later be imprisoned and executed for his role in a Hitler assassination plot, stood up that day and read Revelation, chapter 2, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ spoken by the angel to the church in Ephesus:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.... Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:4-5, 7)

What follows are some excerpts from Bonhoeffer's Reformation Sunday Sermon:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.” The difference between what is here called “the love you had at first” and everything else we usually mean by these words can be succinctly stated: there is no other love besides this love. This love you had at first is the only love there is—for this is the love that comes from God and to God. Besides this love, this love you

had at first, there is only hate, so that to abandon this love is to abandon God, to abandon one's brother or sister. It means that one can then only hate God and the world.

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” means that it was different at first; there was already a beginning in you, too! There was a time, for you too, when something was happening. There was a time—wasn't there?—when you had something to do with God. You used to pray to God, to tell God your troubles and the evil you had done; there was a time when you loved God, when you thought you would try believing in God. There was also an effect on the world around you, in those days; something was really happening. You once loved the others, who so often annoy you and make things difficult for you, because you were thinking of God's love. There was a time when you thought God should be the Lord of your life, even the deepest hidden ground of it, and be Lord of all life that there is, and this indeed became true for you, as you went among the people around you with Jesus Christ in your thoughts and in your heart. “But I have this against you ...”

Now let us turn to the church as a whole. Whatever became of that earliest time of grace, the time of the first Christians who called Jesus Christ the Lord of their lives and left their homes to serve him, when the fire was first lit and began to burn? When the coming of the kingdom of God was awaited with such great longing that it came down and entered into that waiting and took shape there in the most amazing way? Where has the time gone that was described in the words: [from Acts] “Now the whole community was of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:32–33). Where is it now, this church-community that, because it knew of one divine miracle, the resurrection from death into life, thought all things must be possible for the one who believes, believed in the power of grace, in the power of love for God, even to the point of loving others so much as to come down to them in their need and humbly help them? Where is the community of that first love, like a lamp set on a lampstand, a light from God in the midst of the world?

We may surely ask what good it does to recall the past. It is lost to us now. An individual might say: *That was just my first love, my childish devotion. When I grew up and matured, I grew out of it. Of course it was nice then, but there was a lot of illusion in it. I've learned better; I've seen that the world is a bad place and not everything is possible, that we have to make compromises and settle for being less than we thought. This has certainly deadened me, but I'm wiser for it.* This is just the way the church talks.

What can be the answer here? Do you think the first Christians, or the Reformation leaders and their first congregations, didn't know that the world is a bad place? What about those who saw their beloved Master being crucified by the

world—didn't they know it? Indeed, they did, a thousand times better than we do. Just listen to the Bible, just read what Luther wrote. In fact, they knew something more, and it is crucial: they knew the reason why the world is evil, namely, hatred toward God and toward one's neighbor, the human love only for oneself. But now they had seen and heard how God conquered this hate, right in the midst of the world through Jesus Christ and his cross and his resurrection. They believed in this miracle of God's love here in the world, and so they loved God and their neighbors.

... “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent.” It was none other than this call that brought Luther to do what he did: “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent!” You should be burning and you are cold; you should wake up and you are sluggish; you should be hungry and you are full; you should believe and you are afraid; you should have hope and you are grasping for power; you should be loving and you won't come out of yourself; you should let Christ be your Lord and you interrupt when he speaks; you should be doing miracles with him and you are not even doing the most ordinary things.

“Remember then from what you have fallen; repent.” The church of the Reformation is the church of those who expose themselves to this call, who let God be God here, who know that those who are standing are to watch out that they don't fall and not boast that they are standing. Our church stands on God's Word alone, and it is that Word alone that makes us those who stand facing in the right direction. The church that stands in repentance, the church that lets God be God, is the church of the apostles and of Luther.

...This destroying God, before whom we bow, is the Lord of the Promise. God alone knows his people; he is present, right here among us. God alone knows to whom he is speaking when he says: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.” Will we be those people? Will we conquer? Will we be able to keep faith until the end? The future frightens us. But the Promise comforts us. Blessed are those who are called to it.

O God, we pray for the Jewish community, for the people of Pittsburgh, for our nation, and for our world, as we grieve over the terror wrought upon a house of worship in our city yesterday. Heal those who are injured, comfort all those who are affected, and work in all of us the will to put an end to such acts of hatred. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen

Excerpts from “In the Eleventh Hour of Our Church,” [The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Volume 2](#), Fortress Press, 2017, pp. 91-100.

The full text of Bonhoeffer's sermon may be found by clicking [here](#).