

October 27, 2024

Reformation Sunday

Jeremiah 31:31-34

New York Times Article "For Sale: Hundreds of Abandoned Churches. Great Prices. Need Work" T.M. Brown Published 10/25/24

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA

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Together

Having Julia going to college at Salve Regina University, in Newport, Rhode Island, which is, during normal traffic times, only an hour and a half away has been a very different experience from having Abigail attend college in Central Pennsylvania, which, assuming one might have to use the bathroom and put gas in the car, and eat during the trip, is a full seven hours away during normal traffic times, more if you run into traffic jams or construction, which you almost always do.

Because Julia is so much closer, we can do things like we're doing this weekend. Yesterday, after a busy morning and early afternoon at the rummage sale, and then attending Cyrus's soccer game, I hopped in my car and drove to Salve to pick Julia up so that she could come home, celebrate Reformation Sunday with us, and sing in the choir. Britton will take her back to school tonight.

We've seen Julia four times, including this one, since she started college. Five if you count the drop off day. Which means we've made a lot of trips to the campus.

Britton usually does the driving if we're going together, so that gives me the time to take in the scenery. And there's one thing that has really stood out to me on all of those drives. When you think of Newport, you probably think of the mansions from the gilded age and the cliff walk. You might think of the cutesy little touristy town, with its shops and restaurants and historic landmarks. But what has stood out to me on my many trips back and forth is a church. Big surprise, right.

But this church has stood out to me, not because it's so beautiful. Not because it's the site of the wedding of JFK and Jacqueline Kennedy, although one of the Newport churches is.

The church that has stood out to me is a small white church on a residential street. It's a simple church, wooden, with no stained glass, unlike some of the fancy big, stone and stained-glass churches of Newport. One of those churches even has Tiffany-stained glass, you can take a tour to see it. The church that I'm talking about is crammed in between houses on both sides, on a tiny piece of land. It's much smaller than our church building. In fact, it looks like it's about the size of the old Emmanuel building on Cedar Street, with a sanctuary and a basement with its fellowship hall and Christian education space, and not much more. There is no sign out in front of the church telling the world which denomination of Christian it belongs to. And the church is in disrepair. Because the church is clearly closed. Clearly no one is tending to it, it needs to be painted, the steps look rickety, some of the windows are boarded up. It's on a street where all of these people live, in single family houses that look nothing like the mansions that are just a few blocks away, but clearly no one has entered this church in a long time.

On Friday, the New York Times printed an article entitled, "For Sale: Hundreds of Abandoned Churches. Great Prices. Need Work" which, of course, I read, because I'm interested in church things. The article made me think about the abandoned Newport church. I wonder what its history was. What denomination it was. How many people were baptized there, learned about Jesus there, were married there, had their funerals there. How many stories of faith, of confessions, of good preaching and bad preaching, of hope and despair, of new beginnings and endings could those walls tell, if walls could talk.

I wonder what its future will be; that crumbling white church. Is someone going to tear it down to build another house on that crowded street? Is someone going to buy it and turn it into a private home, like so many other churches? Are

the owners of the building, whoever they might be, holding out to see if some religious group, some congregation wants to buy the building and use it for worship again? Are there zoning laws in the way of it becoming some kind of business? Does it have some kind of protected historical status?

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day when we remember and celebrate that steps that Martin Luther took, more than 500 years ago to reform the church of his time; steps that left a lasting legacy of theology, of scholarship, of biblical interpretation, of hymnody, of worship. Steps that brought many good things to the church universal and also some challenging and troubling things.

As I said, I think about that abandoned white church every time I pass it on one of my many trips to Salve Regina, but I'm thinking about it now, and telling you about it now, partly because I just saw it last night, but also because on Reformation Sunday, I always think about the church, not just our congregation, not just the Lutheran church, but the overall church, in all of its diversity of expression and, on its best days, in its unity of faith in Jesus Christ.

The New York Times article about churches being turned into private residences has these words under its title:

As church congregations across the United States wither and disappear, the buildings they leave behind are becoming private homes. (NYT Article cited above)

Wither and disappear. Those are pretty ominous words, though it's certainly not a revelation. We certainly know that there are congregations in our communities that are, indeed, withering and disappearing. Some of those buildings are being repurposed—some are being sold to other congregations, others are being repurposed as things like bars, bookstores, pre-schools and private schools, even a

ropes course, and a skate park. Others are just being demolished to make way for other things, often pricey housing.

The article also included some reasons for the glut of church building on the real estate market right now, writing,

Since about 2000, the number of Americans who belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque has plummeted from around 70 percent to around 47 percent in 2021. The decline has been attributed to several colliding factors, including younger Americans rejecting organized religion, the rise of regional megachurches, internal church schisms, and even the Covid pandemic. (NYT article cited above)

Needless to say, thinking about all of this got me thinking about our church. Not our building, but our congregation.

I think about that a lot, which I'm sure will come as no surprise. I think a lot about what we need to do to keep our congregation healthy, to help us avoid the fate of so many other congregations that are withering and disappearing. There was a time when that seemed to be impossible, like it could never happen to any of the congregations I've been a part of over the course of my life. But now, it feels like any congregation is at risk.

So, I think a lot about how we need to be reformed, in order to continue to thrive as a congregation.

I'll tell you what, this past week, we certainly didn't feel like a congregation at risk. This was Rummage Sale week at Emmanuel. And every Rummage Sale week I wonder a lot and worry a little. My first worry is, will we get enough stuff, will people donate enough rummage for us to sell? This week's answer. Most assuredly, yes. Then my worry becomes, will we get enough volunteers to come and organize all of the donated rummage? This week's answer. Most assuredly, yes. My next

worry is, will enough people come and shop at the Rummage Sale, so that we actually make some money through the sale? This week's answer. Most assuredly, yes. Then my final worry is, will enough people come and help us clean up the sale? This week's answer. Most assuredly, yes. The whole thing was pretty much cleaned up by ten of two and the clean up didn't start until 1:00.

So, by those metrics, the Rummage Sale was a success. But those aren't the only metrics by which you can gauge success.

The Rummage Sale was a success because people came to help who aren't able to get to Sunday worship that often. We saw some people that we haven't seen for a while. And everyone who came was greeted with such enthusiasm. There were lots of hugs and stories shared. There was a lot of catching up, a lot of talking, so much talking, in fact, that it was kind of amazing that the Rummage Sale even got set up at all. There was good food made and shared. With the rummage sale items that didn't sell we made donations of unsold books to More Than Words¹, of unsold winter coats and stuffed animals to the Norwood Food Pantry², and unsold bedding and kitchen things to the New Life Furniture Bank³. And lots of people in our community got things that they needed at a really good price. I talked to one of the Rummage Sale patrons while he was waiting for the doors to open who told me that our Rummage Sale was the best around. We have great stuff at a good price and everything was so neat and clean and organized and welcoming. Another benefit was that some of our church community got to clean out some of their spaces so that their homes are more livable.

The Rummage Sale made us some money, but it did a whole lot more than that. It helped us connect more deeply with one another and with our community. It helped us help others. It helped us share the life, the community, the joy we have in Jesus Christ.

One of the things that stood out most to me in the New York Times article about why people are disconnecting from churches which leads to congregations

withering and disappearing and church buildings standing empty, is the idea of younger people rejecting organized religion. We all know that what for many people what is being rejected is not spirituality or even faith in God; faith in Jesus. What's being rejected is the idea that faith needs to be expressed in communal life.

But the idea that you can have follow Jesus without being a part of a church community is just so disconnected from the triune God we worship, whose nature is community. And it is so disconnected from everything that Jesus lived and that the early church taught. Jesus lived his life in community with his twelve, often aggravating disciples, and the others who gathered around him. And the early post-resurrection followers of Jesus immediately gathered into communities that quickly came to be called churches, and they learned to live out their faith in Jesus in day-to-day challenges of their relationships to one another and to the people around them.

Even the promise we have in today's Old Testament reading, the promise God makes to the wayward people of Judah as their enemies bore down on them and they turned to everything expect God for safety and protection. God promised, even on the brink of disaster, that a day would come when God make a new covenant with the house of Israel* and the house of Judah. This was the promise:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:33b-34)

Do you hear who that promise was for? It was for a community gathered. I kept saying "they" and "them". The promise was for a group. It wasn't for individuals who were supposed to go their separate ways and do their own thing

and find their own path to God. It was a promise for a community, for a people called to be together, to live together, to worship together, to follow God together. And that promise is for us, and it's for all people who have turned their back on the church, on organized religion. It's a calling to reform, to break down walls that keep people away and to come back when we have wandered off.

Friends, it's a call to Rummage Sale faith. Faith that believes that we can do hard things; big things together. Faith that shows up when help is needed. Faith that shares what we have. Faith that welcomes all who come. Faith that listens to each other's stories. Faith that is brave enough to share our stories. Faith that believes that we are bigger than the sum of our parts. Faith that trusts that God is with us. Faith that believes that we are called to be ever reformed, not as individuals, but as a community, as the church, where God's love is written on our hearts, and we share that love with each other and beyond. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ More Than Words

<https://shop.mtwyouth.org/?srsltid=AfmBOopJ1vMVLcMxmrFlk9d3IlkE8wJsah-cwb3IZ3TqsD9QoJqcRo0o>

² Norwood Food Pantry

<https://www.norwoodpantry.org/>

³ New Life Furniture Bank

<https://newlifefb.org/>

*If we wanted this sermon to be about 20 minutes longer, I could go off on an excursus on why it's so amazing that the house of Israel is included in this prophecy, but I don't think we have time for that.