

Church of the Crossroads
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday
October 29, 2006
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BACK TO BASICS

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:21-28
Mark 10:46-52

You probably know that it has not been my practice to preach Reformation Sunday sermons. In truth, I do not believe that I have ever preached a Reformation Sunday sermon! That's not to say that I have completely avoided the theme of reformation. It's just that I have never shared my thoughts about the Protestant Reformation as such.

Why? I often wonder. Is it because I have not been all that confident in my understanding of the Reformation? Partly, I suppose. Or, maybe it goes back to the time I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington and heard Martin Luther's anti-semitic diatribe against the Jews. Or perhaps it's because Luther took the side of the rulers and condemned the Peasants during the Peasant's revolt of 1524-25? Partly, I suppose. Is it perhaps because the Protestant Reformation soon lost its original spirit and Protestantism became as much an establishment as the old Roman Catholic Christendom? Partly, I suppose.

Well, I have changed my mind on all this, just a little. The writings of Douglas Hall and Martin Marty have helped considerably. And so, here goes, my first Reformation Sunday sermon ever.

The Protestant Reformation was made necessary because by the early sixteenth century, and long before, to be truthful, the Roman Catholic Church had lost sight of the original spirit of the Gospel. Christianity began not as an established religion, as any kind of Christendom, but as a movement. In the early days of that Christian movement, there were no external authorities in place that dictated what it meant to be a Christian. To be a follower of Jesus was a matter of the heart. Said the Sovereign God through the prophet Jeremiah, "*this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days . . . 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 Sovereign God, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." (Jeremiah 31:33, 34) In a very real way, those early Christians embodied the spirit of the ancient prophet. Theirs was a faith written upon the heart, apart from any external teachers. Their confession of faith was the sole basis of their participation in the Christian movement.

Soon, however, Christendom changed all that. Following the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire, one was born into Christianity. No longer was it rooted in one's confession of faith. The authority of the church replaced the authority of the Gospel. All kinds of things were added to the Christian faith as it had been lived and practiced by the early Christians. There were creeds and an organized church under the governance of an ecclesial hierarchy. There were edicts and political alliances and tribunals and crusades and inquisitions. There were excesses, everything from selling indulgences to get one's dead relatives into heaven, all for money, of course, to papal luxury and worldliness.

There was so much control over heart and mind that freedom of conscience was sacrificed. Martin Luther eventually found himself deeply troubled by all of this, but his conflict with the Church began with an internal conflict. Internally, he found himself constantly facing an angry God. How to become right with God was his struggle. He even thought that joining a religious order would help. He rigorously followed the rules of his order but it did not help. The righteousness of God, disclosed in harsh judgment, weighed over him still. He sought to arrive to a righteousness of God disclosed not in judgment, but in mercy and compassion. In his misery and turmoil, Luther searched for an answer by reading the scriptures for himself, something the new philosophers of his day had begun to encourage. He read and studied the Psalms, and also Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans, and he came upon an old truth that had been lost in Christendom. We are justified not by the church, not by following the prescriptions of the church, not by perfecting monastic disciplines, not by purchasing indulgences, not by venerating relics, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Wrote St. Paul in his letter to the Romans,

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Romans 3:21)

It was by faith alone that Luther was made right with God. It was through faith alone that Martin Luther came to know a righteousness of God that was rooted in compassion rather than judgment. In the cross, Luther saw that righteousness of God rooted in compassion, God's compassionate identification with humankind. And so it was that he set aside a theology of glory, in many ways the theology of Christendom, in favor of a theology of the cross. That perhaps is the subject for other sermons.

Today, I simply want to re-iterate something Douglas John Hall shared with us in his January lectures. He reminded us that the Reformation produced several famous slogans starting with or including the Latin word signifying exclusivity, *solus* or *sola*, meaning only or solely. Let me name them for us: *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), and perhaps the most important of all *per Christum solum* (through Christ alone). And to these we should add John Calvin's particular motto: *solī Deo gloria*: 'glory to God alone.' And also *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). The first four, grace, faith, God and the Christ – these are the substance of faith. The last, scripture, was viewed by the Reformers as the *form* in which the substance of faith comes to us.

Notice what is not mentioned. There is no mention of the church, or creeds, or interpretations. These, at best are secondary and have validity only when they are rooted in the basics: grace, faith, God, and the Christ, which are revealed to us, and come to us through the scriptures.

What I want to suggest today, in the first place, is that every reform movement in Christianity, whether it be the monastic reform movement of St. Frances, or the reform movement initiated by the Protestant reformers, or the reform movement initiated by our Puritan and Pilgrim forebears, or the Sojourner reform movement within the evangelical church, or the reform movement embodied in the Just Peace and Open and Affirming movement within our own United Church of Christ, all these involve a return to the basics, the basics of grace, faith, God, and the Christ which continue to be revealed to us through the scriptures of the older and newer testaments, not through each and every scripture, mind you, but through the scriptures that have authority for us in our life together.

Let me provide an example. In the Open and Affirming movement within the United Church of Christ, and the counterpart movements within other denominations, a return to the basics, a return to grace alone, faith

alone, God alone, Christ alone, has said to us that sexual orientation is of little importance in comparison to these. When it comes to the essence of Christian faith, it simply does not matter. We must, therefore, be open and welcoming to all who enter the doors of our churches. What really matters is grace, and faith, and God, and the Christ. This is what our scriptures have taught us.

The second observation I wish to offer this morning is that reform is a constant need among us and among all Christians if we are to remain true to the spirit of the Gospel as it was embodied in Jesus and his first followers. We Christians so easily get caught up in things that do not really matter in the long run. This past week, as I was struggling as to how we might negotiate the little conflicts that came up prior to Make a Difference Day, I had to ask myself: what has all this to do with our faith? We get so enamored with our particular projects, our institutional needs, our interpretations, our favorite causes, our political and church agendas, and the trappings of faith, that we can easily lose sight of the essentials. It is then that we substitute other things for the Gospel. That is what Christendom did. That is what established Protestantism did. We must always be ready to weigh our institutional life as a church against the demands and spirit of the Gospel as it was taught and lived by Jesus and his earliest followers.

That is not an easy task but a necessary one. And the rewards for doing so are great. Focusing on the basics of our faith enables us to hear the Gospel itself with new insight. Our eyes will be opened, just as the eyes of Bartimaeus were opened. He did not meet Jesus in some established synagogue. He met him “on the way.” He did not approach Jesus from the standpoint of his participation in a religious institution, or with correct interpretations, a spiritual life all in order, all his t’s crossed and his i’s dotted. He approached Jesus only in faith, and by faith he was healed and found grace.

A more basic story we cannot find anywhere. Such stories as these lie at the very heart of the Gospel, and at the very heart of the movement begun in Jesus. May the story of Bartimaeus, and also the stories of St. Francis and Martin Luther, the stories of John Calvin and the Puritans and the Pilgrims, the stories of reformers in every time and place, all those stories rooted in faith and in God’s grace revealed in Jesus the Christ, be our story as well. Then the Reformation that took place so long ago will become the ongoing reformation of our lives and the life of our church. So be it. Amen.