

Happy Anniversary! As you know October 31<sup>st</sup> of this year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the unofficial start of the Protestant Reformation. Catholic Monk, Martin Luther wrote 95 statements that called for change in the Catholic church and nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther's primary concern was around the practice of some priests called selling indulgences. Although it was not condoned by the Pope or the official teaching of the church, this was a widespread practice done by individual Catholic friars and priests in the Middle Ages. An indulgence, as defined by the Catholic church is "the remission before God of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Jim Jones of West Chester University in Pennsylvania explains the controversy around selling indulgences this way:

The sale of indulgences was a byproduct of the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries. Because they risked dying without the benefit of a priest to perform the appropriate ceremonies, Crusaders were promised immediate salvation if they died while fighting to "liberate" the Christian holy city at Jerusalem. Church leaders justified this by arguing that good works earned salvation, and making Jerusalem accessible to Christians was an example of a good work. Over time, Church leaders decided that paying money to support good works was just as good as performing good works, and it evened things up for people who were physically incapable of fighting a Crusade. Over several centuries, the practice expanded, and Church leaders justified it by arguing that they had inherited an unlimited amount of good works from Jesus, and the credit for these good works could be sold to believers in the form of indulgences. In other words, indulgences functioned like "confession insurance" against eternal damnation because, if you purchased an indulgence, then you wouldn't go to hell if you died suddenly or forgot to confess something. In later years, the sale of indulgences spread to include forgiveness for the sins of people who were already dead.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/indulgenc.php>

<sup>2</sup> <http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101/web/37luther.htm>

But Luther, along with other reformers such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, believed the church was not following the will of God and called for change. As a result, the period known as the reformation brought 4 areas of major change as the Protestant faith emerged<sup>3</sup>:

1. Souls were saved without the cycle of penitence and confession (which was now sinful), but by faith, learning, and the grace of God.
2. Scripture was the sole authority, to be taught in the vernacular (the local languages of the poor).
3. A new church structure: a community of believers, focused around a preacher, needing no central hierarchy.
4. The two sacraments mentioned in the scriptures were kept (Communion and baptism), with some alterations, but the other five were downgraded.

Luther and his contemporaries were by no means the first of the reformers. The Christian faith is built on the reformation led by Jesus. Our scripture this morning gives us a glimpse of Jesus challenging the status quo as he is questioned by a group of Jewish leaders. The text says one of the Pharisees, an expert in Jewish law, poses a question to test Jesus. The tone of this question is not one of genuine curiosity, but of hostile entrapment. Jewish leaders have grown increasingly concerned and disturbed by Jesus' teachings and actions. They wanted to arrest him but they were afraid of how his crowds of followers would react. Trying to balance keeping the peace and holding on to their understanding of their faith, the leaders attempt to stump Jesus with questions like "What is the greatest commandment?" But Jesus responds with words that dumbfound the leaders – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.millerpolitics.com/Reformation.htm>

your soul, and with all your mind.” then Jesus continues saying “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

I think it is important to note that Rabbi Hillel, who was a generation older than Jesus, gave a very similar answer to a similar question as documented in the Jewish Talmud. A gentile approached Rabbi Hillel and said he would convert to Judaism if the Rabbi could recite the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel agreed and stated simply "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this--go and study it!" It is very possible that Jesus was familiar with and inspired by Hillel's teachings.

But then Jesus takes things a step further and poses a question to the Pharisees – “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They responded “The son of David” as the scriptures were interpreted to state that the messiah would be a descendent of King David. But Jesus challenges them – if the messiah is a descendent of David why would David call him Lord? In the hierarchy of a patrilineal system like that which operated at the times of King David and Jesus, it was the father who held the power and authority, not the son or the great, great, great, great, grandson. In this statement Jesus is proclaiming that the messiah is not only a descendent of David, but is also the son of God. This leaves the Pharisees speechless and I think a little embarrassed at how the encounter with Jesus blew up in their face.

It can be tempting to make Jesus in our own image, and picture him as the meek and mild, gentle, harmless Jesus. That's a much easier role model to follow than a

prophetic truth-teller who isn't afraid of confrontation for the sake of faith. But, as Professor Lance Pape of Brite Divinity School writes that "if we take Matthew's testimony seriously, we confront the possibility that our Lord discovered that sometimes in this life there are things worth getting worked up about, things worth arguing about, things that call for those who are able to be both loving and formidable in the cause of righteousness"<sup>4</sup>

Reformation is at the core of our tradition all the way back to Jesus and earlier. Questioning the accepted traditions of faith, challenging the status quo, listening and waiting for the movement of God's spirit – these are all things that faithful people of God have been doing for centuries and it is our task in this era as well. But today we are celebrating a bold and courageous stand taken by man attempting to be faithful to the God's call. Reformers like Luther broke down the walls erected by the church between God and the people. It is because of the reformation that women like me are in pulpits and leading congregations. It is because of the reformation that anyone can read the scriptures without clergy as an intermediary.

But the reformation isn't over friends. One of the key mottos that emerged out of the Reformation was the phrase, "Reformed and reforming." The act of reformation is ongoing. In the United Church of Christ we proclaim a Still-Speaking God, a God who continues to reveal God's truth and wisdom and will for people each and every minute. This speaking of God is not only for clergy or people who have been going to church for their entire lives – the God is calling each of us, whispering and sometimes shouting to

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2202](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2202)

each of us, to continue to listen and then to act in ways that bring the ways of God to fruition on earth. Ways that give life to the words “love your neighbor as yourself.”

God is calling on us to be reformers. Reformers of the church at all levels, reformers of our lives, reformers of our relationships, reformers of our communities, our nation, and our world. We must be willing to take a good hard look at the way things are and consider if God might be challenging us to make a new way. As I wrote in the weekly email, it has been said that the most dangerous phrase in any institution is “We’ve always done it this way.” Change for the sake of change is not the answer, but remaining the same because it’s safe or easy is not the answer either.

In the words of David Lose, “Perhaps the best way to celebrate the reformation is not to celebrate it at all, but rather to repeat it.”<sup>5</sup> In this time when the Christian narrative has been co-opted by intolerance, when Christianity is invoked as a justification for discrimination, we must not be afraid to use Luther’s words and say “Here I stand.” Here we stand for a message of inclusion and love. Here we stand for a faith that believes religions is compatible with science. Here we stand with a bold voice for justice.

So may we see the world around us with open eyes and open hearts. May we perceive God’s invitations to new life and have the courage to bring them to fruition. May we not be afraid to boldly proclaim where our faith is leading. May we discern when and where we must take a stand for the sake of love. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/reformation-sunday-the-truth-about-the-truth/>