

October 25, 2009

Reformation Sunday

John 8: 31-36

*“Reformed and always reforming”*

The biblical texts for this day actually stray from ones listed on the Revised Common Lectionary. Since I don't know exactly why, I am able only to speculate. It does seem to me that when there is focus on the Church's history, it is most appropriate to also focus on the meaning of discipleship.

*Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

So...what is it that we Presbyterian Christians believe in and hold dear? What are the tenets of our faith to which we adhere? As we look back in history, what are the events and who are the people we commemorate? At this moment in time, what is God doing among us and through us? And as we look to the future, where is God leading?

Since I was a fairly new Presbyterian when I went off to seminary, I had much to learn about John Calvin, John Knox and the Reformed Tradition. I'm still learning and, since my ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I've become aware that many life-long Presbyterians are struggling to understand what being reformed is all about. Small wonder, then, that many in our own congregation eagerly participated in Rebecca's class on the European Reformation during the summer months.

Joseph D. Small, Director of Theology, Worship and Education of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in an article entitled *“John Calvin 500!”* wrote: “Many Presbyterians greet the news that 2009 will mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth with a yawn, a roll of the eyes, or even a derisive snort. Why are we so dismissive of our forebear in the Reformed tradition?”

Small goes on to say this: “Lutherans adore Martin Luther. Methodist hearts are strangely warmed by John Wesley. Anglicans even have a sardonic fondness for Henry VIII. But Presbyterians are uncertain about John Calvin and his legacy. Calvin is not a reformed idol.”

While Joseph Small contends that Calvin would have been pleased that we have failed to place him on a pedestal, my own thoughts are different. It is my less-well-informed opinion that John Calvin is smiling down on his likeness captured by a sculptor and displayed in prominence on the Reformers Wall in Geneva, Switzerland. (Why, even Luther isn't so graced!) Rather, the four historical religious figures represented in the following order are William Farel, John Calvin, Theodore Beza and John Knox. The Latin inscription and motto of both the Reformation and Geneva is *“Post Tenebras Lux”* which translated is *“After darkness, light.”*

Whether or not we Presbyterians venerate John Calvin, he was a brilliant educator and theologian who made significant contributions to the Reformation. In the words of Joseph Small “(Calvin’s) perspectives on Christian faith and life have shaped Reformed churches throughout the world, and continue to shape our church today.”

The motto, often misused and misunderstood, that yet rings in the ears of Presbyterians is comprised of the following ancient words “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!*” translated and more commonly used by those of us gathered today “*The church reformed and always to be reformed*” or “*reformed and always reforming.*”

Now cool and easy-to-roll-off-the-tongue as this slogan truly is, when taken seriously, it can be quite challenging. Why? Well, just as true discipleship is less than a piece of cake, so is the directive to be “reformed and always reforming.” The reason is because transformation often is painful. It’s way easier and ever so much more comfortable to continue doing ministry as it’s always been done. But I ask you, what if Luther and Calvin and the other reformers had opted to remain complacent? And what if one Jesus of Nazareth had failed to heed God’s voice and wandered from place to place spewing syrupy messages? What if he had chosen the easy way out?

In the 2009 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study of our denomination the Minute for Mission for this Reformation Sunday is about the congregation of Shawnee Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, people who “are familiar with the passion and pain associated with reform.” (p. 301) Members of that particular church ultimately experienced situations similar to those of the chaotic Reformation period. Just as there were “harsh debates and struggles” in Geneva and other parts of Europe that divided one group from another, so there were at Shawnee Presbyterian. The turmoil began when members of the congregation turned their collective attention from themselves to people who live in the community. The changes that occurred stirred deep resentment and anger. Some people left the church while others withheld their money in protest.

At the time decisions were being made and changes were taking place, there were only forty-four members in the congregation. So it was that the elders serving on the session discerned prayerfully what it was that they believed God was calling them to do and they stuck to their guns. According to the entry in the Mission Yearbook “the session held fast to the belief that the church cannot rely on tradition, on structures, on its own spiritual vitality, or anything else in the world. Instead, it draws its life from communion with the crucified and risen Lord.” (Ibid.) Wow! Now I ask you, is this not what Jesus was talking about when he described true discipleship?

Now change merely for the sake of change is quite often futile. But when people give way to the movement of the Spirit, amazing things can happen as the congregation of Shawnee Presbyterian has discovered. Through their struggles and pain the people have learned and grown.

Unless we have had our heads in the sand, we are all too aware that the Church's history has been troubled, even violent at various periods of time. Woven into the mesh have been political wrangling, exiles and executions from the day of inception. And, of course, even prior to what has become the Christian Church, people of all times and places have battled in the name of religion.

When I was growing up in West Virginia, Catholics and Protestants might be friends at school but certainly they were not to marry. One of my friends was not even allowed to invite a Catholic into his home. My own church gave warning to their young on such matters and Catholic priests did the same. The only blessing that seemed possible was if the Protestant converted which, as you might suspect, sent shivers through the souls of Protestant clergy persons and parents. Then in 1999 the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans adopted a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, agreeing on the primacy of God's action in salvation. The Church was and is yet reforming.

So...how is God acting in our individual lives and in the life of this congregation at this moment in time? How is the Spirit moving and shaking us and our entire denomination, reforming and transforming? What is God doing right this very minute in terms of molding us into more authentic Christians?

It's almost impossible to escape the debates that are currently taking place in the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic churches to name a few. Some issues, the ordination of women, gays and Lesbians in particular, cross lines. Opinions are quite strong, just as they were during the Reformation, divisions are occurring, people are leaving churches, fingers are pointed in all directions and pain seems to be a universal reality. Though dire predictions are made, most of us have not a clue as to what will happen. Could it be, do you think, that a new and stronger Church might emerge?

Today this congregation will welcome into the body of Christ two children. Apparently it is important to their parents and extended families that the girls be schooled in the traditions of their ancestors. Seeds of faith are being planted and fed by the waters of the font. It then becomes our collective responsibility to support them along with their parents as they grow into maturity. Brianna will undoubtedly remember more of this day than will her little sister. Hopefully both of them will, with our encouragement, question and wrestle with theological issues. It will be their responsibility to help shape the Church's future.

Recently while reading some materials on stewardship and spiritual growth I came across the quote from Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is the one printed in the bulletin for this day, a quote that underscores our motto: "the Church reformed and always to be reformed." Morrison's is: "Tradition is there to arouse us, not to arrest us."

As we cling to our rich heritage, let us build upon it and go forward. And let us hold to the truth of the gospel.

***Jesus said...“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free...I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father...I am the way and the truth and the life.”***

**The way of truth is never easy but with the truth the Church will ever be reforming. Amen.**

