

Reformation: Fatigue or Awakening?
Reformation Sunday
October 30, 2016
Trinity Bixby
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[Luke 19: 1-10](#)

[Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 9-15](#)

[Isaiah 1: 10-18](#)

Ahh, Reformation Sunday. The bagpiper leads us in, we sing old Lutheran hymns, and talk about the days of the true Kirk of Scotland and Calvin's ordered church of Geneva. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum dei!* [The Church Reformed, and always being reformed, according to the Word of God]. It's so easy for today be a bombastic, over-the-top service that we can lose sight of what it is that we are remembering, what it is that we are celebrating, and what it is that we are called to do as this Reformed Church. So, let's take a moment, and delve into this weird Reformation Sunday.

First of all, have you heard about the Reformation? What do you know of it? I'll admit that my question is a little misleading – as it suggests that the Reformation was a one-time event, a historical time period, or something to that extent. But remember the motto? “The Church Reformed, and always being reformed.” God brings about reformation at all times – in our individual lives, in the life of the church, even in the life of the world. Though we can talk about the founding of the Protestant churches as “the Reformation,” that really ought to be a shorthand for “The recognition of God's constant reformation.” Unwieldy, yes, but that's the difficulty you may find when trying to be precise and accurate.

Ok, let's jump in. Turn back the clock a mere half-millennium, and we find that Europe, then the center of Christianity, is roiling with political,

theological, and social conflict. Ordinary folks are having an incredibly difficult time getting by, power and wealth are accumulating in the hands of very few – and the acknowledged leader of the Church is preaching that you can buy forgiveness for your sins if you can't be bothered to do penance after confession. One family controls the nations of Spain, Austria, and is in the process of bribing their way into controlling the fractious territories that we'll just call the Germanies. [Confusingly, the Germanies are called the "Holy Roman Empire," and they have seven people who elect their emperor, four governors (called Princes) and three bishops.] In the midst of all of this turmoil, an obscure monk in Wittenburg has been preaching against the way the Pope was trying to sell repentance. True repentance, this monk believed, comes from within, and involves changing oneself completely. Here's a taste of what Martin Luther was complaining about:

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.
44. Because love grows by works of love, man thereby becomes better. Man does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties.
45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.
46. Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.

Those items – along with others – make up the 95 statements that Luther would nail to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral on Wednesday, October 31, 1517. For all the hoopla that surrounds that event, maybe you'd expected some stronger language – but remember that Luther didn't intend on starting the Protestant revolution. He just happened to be the right person at the right time in the right place for that reformation to happen. He's also not

alone in that!

In our passage from Isaiah today, God warns the people that they've missed the point: "When you extend your hands, I'll hide my eyes from you. Even when you pray for a long time, I won't listen. Your hands are stained with blood. Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." Isaiah, writing about 2000 years before Luther, was facing a similar situation. The established religion of his people - the worship of God in Israel and Judah – was in trouble from political powers at home and abroad. What had been one kingdom had fractured in two, and many kings in both north and south were chasing Pagan wealth and ignoring the very things that God had called God's children to do: care for each other, seek justice, do good. Instead, many of the kings, and many of the people following their example, were making a big show of worship and asking forgiveness, but then not actually doing anything to make it better. The hands of the ruling class were stained with blood – not just literally from skirmishes between the kingdoms, but metaphorically for all those who were not helped, despite the opportunity to do so.

It's important to note here that Isaiah is preaching this word from Adonai in the temple gates; he's not calling for the temple to be torn down, or people to stop worshipping God in the ways that God has called the people to worship. Instead, Isaiah is calling people to task to DO what God has told them to do. To repent – to return – to reform. To worship God not just in the temple by words, but in the world by action. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea – these prophets are all speaking up, and telling people to bend back to God's way.

There's a lot of parallels between Luther and Isaiah that are intriguing, but it doesn't stop there. The late church historian Phyllis Tickle describes a

regular, approximately 500-year cycle of reforms and great change, running as far back as we have any reliable records. Those great changes are these: Abraham's Journey from Ur, about 2000 BCE. The Exodus and return from Egypt, about 1450 BCE. The establishment of the Israel monarchy, about 950 BCE. The return from exile in Assyria and Babylon, followed by the rebuilding of the temple 538 BCE. Jesus' ministry and resurrection, followed by the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. The Council of Chalcedon, October 8 – November 1 in 451 CE. The Great Schism between Catholic and Eastern Orthodox in 1054 CE. The Reformation, starting October 31, 1517. And, that brings us to today, in the midst of what is starting to be called the "Great Emergence." (We'll come back to that last one in a moment.)

Truly, there is "nothing new under the sun," as the book of Ecclesiastes insists! That writer tells us that there is a time and a purpose for everything – and that God made everything beautiful for its own time, placing the whole of eternity in the human heart, even though we cannot see the whole scope of it from beginning to end. Luther echoed this sentiment in Wittenberg, writing "The time for silence is over; the time to speak has come!" And speak, he did. Called before a church council in Worms, Luther was asked if he would recant the position of all of his books, given that the Papal council had decried them as heresy. Luther stood strong in his conviction, expressing that, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason – for I can believe neither Pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen."

Luther was condemned a heretic, and sentenced to be executed by the

emperor. Yet, he was protected by one of the Princes of Germany, escaping execution and starting the long process of reform – both in the newly-splintered Protestant churches, and in the form of the counter-reformation in the Catholic church. Luther's ideas took root not only in the Germanies, but in France and Switzerland, the Netherlands, England and Scotland too. Since this was also the beginning of the colonization of the New World, many of these Protestants fled prosecution in their home countries for the questionable life of a colonist. These people's lives were literally reformed – exchanging the familiarity and fatigue of life as they had always known it for hard work, newness, and awakening of the Spirit in the New World and in the European bastions of safety that could be found.

Think of the reformations like this: an egg hatches, and a caterpillar crawls out. It eats the leaves of its context, and grows depending on the nutrients it finds. At some point, maybe beset by birds, or just when the time is right, the caterpillar goes into a chrysalis or cocoon. After it is completely reformed in the cocoon, it emerges and looks very different as a butterfly – laying eggs for another generation to go through the same process. Each caterpillar and butterfly looks different, but the process is the same each time.

What is that process? It is the process of always being reformed according to the Word of God. For, though we emerge time and time again, from egg and from chrysalis, it is always God who calls us to be reformed again. It is God who finds us when we are lost, and calls us to right relationship with each other. You see, while these great reformations are taking place constantly, they don't happen without our participation. Remember, Jesus called people to repent, to turn back to God and away from sin and separation. And when we do so – when we answer God's call, that's when we truly emerge as butterflies for the next cycle to continue. Diana Butler Bass, historian and theologian, puts

it this way: “It may seem as if religion is on a trajectory of unstoppable change, but genuine spiritual change does not result from historical determinism. Spiritual awakening is not ultimately the work of invisible cultural forces. Instead, it is the work of learning to see differently, of prayer, and of conversion. It is something people do. Awakening is the result of what New Testament writers referred to as *metanoia*, a change of perspective and outlook that moves human beings beyond chaos toward a new harmony with God and divine things.” The word that Diana Butler Bass uses, *metanoia* is the word in Greek that is usually translated, “repentance”.

This is what happens in our story from Luke today. We see this *metanoia*, this repentance, this change of perspective that changes everything in Zacchaeus’ life. And we are called, in the midst of the Great Emergence, to act like Zacchaeus – so pay attention. Little Zach is a supremely wealthy man. He has purchased the right to “farm” not the land of Jericho – but the people. As such, Rome sends him a target tax rate that he must submit to them, and anything he collects above this is his profit. Not surprisingly, he’s wealthy – and the people consider him the worst kind of sinner, one who is oppressing his own people for personal benefit. Yet, there’s something about Jesus’ ministry that has called him to repentance, to *metanoia*, to fix this mess that he’s caused. So, since he has cheated people – and his big temptation seems to have been money – he gives half of what he has to the poor, and repays those he has defrauded four-fold! And Jesus tells him that he is no longer lost, but is found! We, too are called to this change. To this reforming – from a lost caterpillar to a butterfly, soaring on the breath of God. From the fatigue of a me-first society to the awakening of God’s love, filling the emergence of care for each other. No longer defrauding, no longer hurting, but holding each other close, and healing the wounds we have caused.

My friends, this is the Good News: You are loved. From beginning to end, and beyond, you are loved. God forms you and reforms you, and calls you to love as God has loved you. So, may you be reformed by God's love. May you wake to Jesus' call, seeking justice for the oppressed. May the Holy Spirit bring you to repent, turning back to God whenever you find yourself leaving God's path. Amen.