

“Reformation Sunday”

Mark 10:46-52

When the blind beggar identified in the Gospel of Mark as Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus to have mercy on him, the crowd that was there that day to see Jesus tried to shush him up. Perhaps they didn't want him to ruin their experience of seeing Jesus, or maybe they thought it unseemly for someone to be shouting like that when this great teacher was passing through their community of Jericho. Bartimaeus was an embarrassment and an annoyance. The crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet.

On this Reformation Sunday, Bartimaeus might seem a bit out of place, a man seeking healing for his blindness. What does that have to do with the Reformation? But on the other hand, the story may be a good reminder to us of some of those reformers in the 16th century who, like Bartimaeus were seeking a kind of sight, or insight, and who, like him, were told to be quiet. Men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and John Knox, three of whom (apart from Zwingli) are pictured on our bulletin cover this morning.

The reformers came to believe that the practices of the church at that time had veered off from the pure Gospel as presented in the Scriptures, and so they sought to reform the church. As it turned out, however, they ended up parting with the church and forming new churches. And thus came the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Reformation Sunday is always the last Sunday in the month of October. The reason for that is that it was on All Souls Eve, October 31, that Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the chapel at Wittenberg. Whether or not he actually did that, and apparently there is some doubt, we do know that he mailed a letter to his superiors on that date, listing his 95 points of discussion, raising questions about some of the practices of the church at that time, most notably the practice of selling indulgences for the forgiveness of sins in order to raise money to build cathedrals.

Most years, here at Westminster, we do not do much with Reformation Sunday other than let it pass by quietly. This year, however, as most of you know by now, we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the spiritual father of the Presbyterian Church. And so it seemed appropriate this year that we do something special on Reformation Sunday. Thus we are using this somewhat modified service, many parts of which come from John Calvin himself.

The fact that we are celebrating John Calvin's birth and Reformation Sunday should not be taken, by any means, as an indication that we are thumbing our collective noses at our Catholic brothers and sisters. We are not. We are merely celebrating our heritage. As it turns out, some 500 years later, Catholic churches and Protestant churches find themselves coming together in many and varied settings and increasingly finding common ground. Catholic churches are singing hymns that used to be considered to be Protestant, and Protestants like us, are designing worship services using liturgy that has strong echoes of Catholicism. So we celebrate Reformation Sunday not to say that we have anything over or against our Catholic friends, but only to remember and reclaim our own heritage.

Last spring Diane and I had the opportunity to visit Geneva, Switzerland. Our daughter and her family were living, temporarily, in Basel while our son-in-law was working with a company there, and we took the opportunity to visit and to tour around a bit. Diane even took it upon herself to re-read a biography of Calvin that we had in our library, so she was really up to speed.

Geneva was at the top of our list of places to visit, all because of John Calvin. And, because of his 500th anniversary, the city was all abuzz with Calvin. There were posters everywhere touting the special exhibit at the International Museum of the Reformation, which we visited. The museum is housed right next to the Cathedral de St. Pierre or St. Peter's Cathedral, where Calvin preached in the 1500's, high up in an elaborately carved pulpit common to the times. We got the combined ticket that entitled us to visit the museum, the archeological dig beneath the cathedral and the cathedral itself. We only had one morning to devote to this visit, but it was one of the highlights of our trip.

So we are celebrating Calvin and the Reformation this year, and we are thinking about our heritage as those who have followed in the footsteps of those reformers. But aside from the fact that this is a Presbyterian Church and therefore Protestant as opposed to Catholic, what really does the Reformation mean to us? Is it merely a fact of history, something to look back upon and appreciate, or does it have some contemporary value for us?

One of the mottos that came out of the reformation and that has been adopted by the Presbyterian church is, in Latin, "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.*" This is usually translated as, "The church reformed, always reforming." Dr. Paul Capetz, who was to be our speaker last Saturday evening but who was delayed by a cancelled flight and thus was unable to come, sent us the sermon that he gave the next day at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester. In that sermon, Dr. Capetz translates that Latin phrase this way: "The church reformed, yet always to be reformed ever anew."

He goes on to say that just as Luther and Calvin had to face the challenges of their day as they sought to reform the church, we too, who fall into that reformed tradition, must be prepared to reform our inherited traditions. We are always in the process of being reformed. What does that mean? It means that we are not simply part of a church that broke off from another church and that we can revel in that identity and regard ourselves as somehow better than those we left behind. In fact, we can't do that. What it means, instead, is that we are always called to be reexamining our beliefs and practices, always endeavoring to be faithful to the Gospel of Christ in the ever changing world.

As Dr. Capetz points out in his excellent sermon, the faithful handing on of the tradition we have received is not a merely passive process, but an active one. It is not "uncritical acceptance of what has come down to us from the past" but an active process that involves "critically testing what we have received in the light of our best understanding of the gospel."¹ And, of course, as he points out, this is not an easy process, for we have differing views about the Gospel and what from our past should be discarded and what should be handed on faithfully.

Which brings us back to Bartimaeus. In Calvin's commentary on the Gospel of Mark, he deals with the story of the healing of Bartimaeus: "It is surprising that the disciples of Christ, who follow him through a sense of duty and of respect, should wish to drive wretched men from the favor of Christ, and, so far as lies in them, to prevent the exercise of his power." He is referring, of course, to the people along the way who tried to discourage poor Bartimaeus from calling out to Jesus and asking for his help. He goes on: "But it frequently happens that the greater part of those who profess the name of Christ, instead of inviting us to him, rather hinder or delay our approach."²

And right there, it seems to me, is one of the crucial areas of our continuing need to be reformed. One of the best examples of those who were told to be quiet and who were hindered or delayed in their approach to Christ by those who profess the name of Christ, even the reformers we honor, is the issue of women in the church. For most of the history of Christianity it was the women of the church who were being hindered from approaching Christ as full participants. Women were not allowed to serve the church in ordained positions.

In our denomination it was not until a little over 100 years ago, in 1906, that women were allowed to be ordained as Deacons, and almost another quarter of a century (1930) before they could be ordained as elders, and still another quarter of a century (1956) before women were ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament.³ This process did not go smoothly, by any means, as some of those here who are old enough may recall. Many pointed to the Bible, references where women are commanded to be silent in the church and are not to hold positions of leadership. Some churches left the denomination over these changes. But most of those of us who stayed can't imagine going back, and find the earlier prohibitions unthinkable.

The church is reformed, but it is always in the process of being reformed. In this case, we reformed the reformers!

Now, of course, and for the last forty years or so, the church has been dealing with the homosexual issue. We have been struggling to find the right answer, just as we did with the question of women and ordination. We have differing opinions on how that issue should be settled even here in this church, let alone in the denomination. This is what it means to be reformed but always being reformed. So we continue to struggle with that issue.

Celebrating Reformation Sunday means not simply recognizing where we have come from, but who we are. We are a church that is always in the process of being reformed, always in the process of trying to discern God's will for our time, always reexamining our beliefs and practices, and trying always to be faithful not just to what has been handed down to us, but to what we will in turn hand down to those who come after us. And so we celebrate Reformation Sunday not simply to recognize those who went before us and helped to shape our beliefs and practices, but also to be reminded who we are and that we are always in the process of being reformed ever anew.

¹ *Continuing the Reformation*, Paul E. Capetz, sermon given at Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, NY, 10/18/09

² <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom32.html> (Harmony of the Evangelists, Vol. 2)

³ from the Witherspoon Society website