

“Reformed and Always Reforming”

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Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2014, Ordinary 30A

Psalm 90:1-6,13-17 Matthew 22:34-40

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517, the German priest Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses to the door of a church in Germany, calling for a public debate about selling indulgences. The Roman Catholic Church was charging money to pray for the souls of people who had died, and were supposedly stuck in purgatory, between heaven and hell. The prayers were supposed to release them. Luther protested against this practice and against a church that seemed to be more concerned with raising money than with the souls of its people. He was not the first protestor, and he was not alone.

One of the first reformers was John Wycliffe, a theologian and philosopher from England. He is most famous for translating the Bible into English in 1380, a hundred years before Luther was even born. Wycliffe wanted to make the Bible accessible to anyone who could read, because he believed that the church itself should not be the highest authority: that should be the scriptures and God. Wycliffe attacked the Pope, calling him the anti-Christ and claimed the real church was invisible and very different from the wealthy and visible church based in Rome. He also condemned the doctrine of transubstantiation, that is, at communion the bread and wine is transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ.

Wycliffe influenced another early reformer, Jan Hus, a priest based in the Czech Republic. Hus translated and distributed Wycliffe's writings and preached against the moral failings of church leaders. He also argued that no Pope or Bishop has any right to take up the sword to enforce the will of the church. Instead, they should pray for their enemies and bless those who curse them, as Jesus taught. He also preached against selling indulgences, and taught that forgiveness of sins comes through repentance, not money. But this teaching was not well received in Rome. Jan Hus was summoned to Rome and he went, believing he had been guaranteed a safe passage. But once there, he was imprisoned and put on trial for heresy. The trial lasted for months, but Hus refused to renounce his beliefs and was found guilty. He was tied to a stake and burned to death. This was in 1415, a hundred years before Luther posted his theses.

But the reformer most closely connected to Presbyterians is John Calvin, a lawyer and theologian from France. Calvin was younger than Luther, and broke away from the Catholic Church around 1530. Protestants were being persecuted at that time in France and several of his colleagues were beheaded. So Calvin went into hiding, and eventually fled to Switzerland. He settled in Geneva where he established a new form of religious government and introduced new forms of liturgy.

Luther was passionate and appealed to the masses, but Calvin was known for his strict and intellectual approach to faith. While his government brought many positive

improvements, he also punished dissent. In the first five years of his rule in Geneva, 58 people were executed and 76 exiled for their religious beliefs. And Calvin didn't allow any form of art except music, and no instruments! Still, his practices and extensive writings form the basis of present day Presbyterianism. In Calvin's system, scripture was central, human sin was assumed, God's grace was the only thing necessary for salvation, and God rules over all civil and religious authorities. Under Calvin's leadership, Geneva sent out pastors to the rest of Europe, creating the Puritan Movement in England, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, and Presbyterianism in Scotland.

Much of our American form of Presbyterianism came from the reformation in Scotland, led by a fiery and combative priest named John Knox. Knox was arrested in Scotland, along with many others, for preaching against purgatory and prayers for the dead, and preaching for the authority of the Bible and justification by faith alone. He was chained to a bench in a French ship and forced to row as a galley slave, and then imprisoned for 19 months in France. He was threatened with torture if he didn't show proper signs of reverence for the virgin Mary. When he was released he took refuge in England and eventually went to Geneva to study with Calvin. Years later he returned to lead the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, which was later brought over to the United States by Presbyterian immigrants.

During the reformation, the stakes were high for those who openly disagreed with established church teaching. These men were brave to expose corruption and try to engage in real dialogue about important theological issues. They risked their lives for the sake of the truth, and some of them lost their lives.

But they were inspired by Jesus, a true reformer. Jesus believed God's love and care was for everyone, not just the religious elite. And he wanted people to think differently about religious laws and commandments. But the Pharisees felt that Jesus was threatening their authority, so they looked for opportunities to entrap him in what he said. In the story Lisa read today, they were testing Jesus' view of the law. But the Pharisees weren't interested in real dialogue. Their questions were traps, designed to discredit Jesus and hold onto their own traditions and power. But it was clear that the questions were backfiring: Jesus always had a good answer. So they stopped the discussion, went away, and conspired to kill him instead.

Today the stakes are not as high. The church is not about to execute anyone for heresy, although there are still many issues we disagree about, including how to interpret scripture, and the nature and significance of Jesus Christ. But Presbyterians also know that any institution that wants to stay healthy must be open to reform. It's not just about guarding against sin and corruption, although that's a big part of it. Sometimes we also have to change our way of thinking.

We have changed our thinking about slavery. Some Presbyterians used to be slave owners. In 1835 a report to our General Assembly stated that since "slavery was recognized in the Bible, to demand abolition was unwarranted interference in state laws." Not everyone agreed with that statement, but they chose not to debate it further. But by

1861 the church was deeply divided over the issue of slavery and ended up splitting north and south. But we have all changed our minds. Today no one would even think of arguing in favor of slavery, even though it is recognized in the Bible.

We have also changed our thinking about women. When the first General Assembly of the PCUSA met in Philadelphia in 1789, all our church officers-- deacons, elders and ministers were men. The very idea that a woman might hold office would be considered crazy. It wasn't until the 1930's that women were allowed to serve as elders or deacons. And it took another 20 or 30 years before women were allowed to serve as pastors. But today it's not an issue. Half of the elders and pastors in our denomination are women, and no one thinks anything of it.

We changed our thinking about slavery, and about women in leadership roles. And now we are in the process of changing our thinking about marriage. The biblical writers and reformers all assumed that a marriage covenant would be between a man and a woman. But in a different time and place we are asking questions. What is it about a marriage covenant between two people that reflects God's will? Is it necessary to be able to produce biological children? If so, then those who have passed the age of fertility should not be allowed to marry. Does same sex marriage serve the common good? Can it reflect Christ's self-giving love and bring two people closer to God? Can two people of the same sex have a godly, joyful, life-giving love for each other?

I am grateful to be a Presbyterian today. We have received a strong inheritance and tradition from the reformers before us. One of their mottos was "Reformed and always reforming." We recognize our continuing need to change, to keep reforming so that we can be faithful to the gospel today. Sometimes we are wrong. Sometimes we are too slow to respond to God's spirit, and we don't change soon enough. And not everyone is always happy with the changes we make. We are human beings. But we believe God still speaks through scripture in every culture in our changing world. And sometimes God calls us to change our practice and our thinking.

May we be faithful to the spirit of God today, as we seek to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.