

Our Reformed Faith

October 28, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Reformation Sunday

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Joel 2:23-32, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 and Luke 18:9-14

This past week, I spoke in a group about the movie “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” starring Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy and Sidney Poitier. One younger person did not know anything about the movie and that reminded me how often we take background material for granted. We make false assumptions about what people know and what they don’t know. Hear the first sentence of the movie’s plot summary as found at imdb.com (Internet Movie Database):

Joey Drayton brings her fiancé, Dr. John Prentice, home to sunny San Francisco to meet her affluent parents. Their liberal persuasions are now put to the test, for although the young man is an ideal choice (he's highly and internationally respected in the medical field, and he's impeccably mannered, handsome, well dressed and of a respectable California family), he's black.

Sally has just completed listening to a reading of “Kate Remembered,” A. Scott Berg’s biography of Katharine Hepburn. I am two-thirds of the way through listening to Sidney Poitier read his own work “The Measure Of A Man - A Spiritual Autobiography.” I am at the point in his book when he is recalling the production of “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” during which time he confesses he was daunted by working with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy.

The movie was produced in 1967, when, as Mr. Poitier recalls, both The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated and when the Supreme Court declared state laws against inter-racial marriage unconstitutional. Indeed, in the middle of the movie, the character playing Sidney Poitier’s father says to his son who plans to marry a white woman: "In 16 or 17 states you'll be breaking the law. You'll be criminals."

In speaking of the 1960’s, Mr. Poitier talks of the progress that comes when opposites collide – and certainly the upheaval and slow progress that unfolded during the civil rights’ campaigns were a time of “collision.” One commentator sums it this way:

Sidney Poitier helped change many persistent racial attitudes that had persisted in this country for centuries by the image he projected on and off the screen and the very life that he has lived. ... He ... stood and still stands for hope, for excellence, and who has given happiness and the will to persevere in questionable times to millions of people around the world.

I rewrite that commentary: Let us, on Reformation Sunday, take a hard look at persistent religious attitudes that persisted for centuries that were confronted by people of character whose work and passion for the ministry of Jesus the Christ “still stands for hope, for excellence, and who have given happiness and the will to persevere in questionable times to missions of people around the world.” Five hundred years ago, John Calvin, John Knox, Ullrich Zwingli and Martin Luther and his wife Katherine von Bora, challenged the status quo of the Catholic Church – and as members of the reformed faith, we continue to lay hold of the truths they expounded.

As with my time with our younger disciples, when I gave each of them a leaf from one of the church's burning bushes [at The Rev. Strawbridge's suggestion, I made sure that *Dictamnus albus* was not poisonous – and gave them out in little clear bags], we recall that God speaks to *each of us* – not just a select few, that God's Word made flesh in Jesus the Christ is something that all of us are to receive on an equal footing. As we heard from our reading from the words of the prophet Joel [2:28-29],

... I will pour out my Spirit on *all* people, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

To be sure, some people may know Scripture forwards if not backwards, some have more training in certain aspects of ministry and mission, some can sing or play an instrument, and some enjoy preparing and working mission projects and/or church fundraisers, but each and every one of us is called to ministry – and each of us is, in our Baptism, and celebration of the LORD's Supper – is equal before God. The phrase “the priesthood of all believers” was not a hollow claim half a millennia ago and is not hollow now. Each of us can speak directly to the Almighty God. Christ is the only intercessor we need (a rejection of praying through Mary or one of the Saints so that they might intercede on our behalf). Finally, we affirm that it is our faith in Jesus Christ that saves us.

Let's be clear! During the Reformation, some people went a little too far. In rejecting Jesus' mother Mary as an intercessor, some reduced Mary's role to near nothingness, when we of the reformed tradition still acknowledge her as a faithful servant of God who bore the Christ child, raised Him in faith and stands as an example to all of the rest of us who would, if you will, “bear” the Word which is Jesus the Christ to the rest of the world. Yes, it shocks us that a minority within the Catholic community wants to elevate Mary to the role of co-redemtrix, that is Co-Redeemer with Christ, but that doesn't mean that we reject Mary's role in its entirety just because a few want to make her part of the God-head. Is there not an irony in that? The Marists want to call her the “Mother of God,” thus affirming the significant role of females in the faith, but God forbid they ordain a woman a Priest! At one point during the Reformation, *all* adornments were set aside so that attention would be only on Christ. In the fervor of the times, stained glass was smashed, colorful paraments were burned and Communion was served on the barest of plates and crudest of cups. This Sanctuary, built in the Reformed Tradition would be considered ornate by those over-played standards.

This past Wednesday, I asked members of the Adult Bible Class to read our lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke and see if there were any motifs and messages that spoke to the Reformation. I reminded them how the three-year Lectionary was compiled and are used by many Christian traditions including Roman Catholic and Episcopal, neither of which are “reformed.” Today's readings were, therefore, *not* selected with any intentionality or sense that some of us call today “Reformation Sunday.” Thinking there were three “Reformed Tradition” motifs in this passage, members of the class found *four* – some of which (admittedly) overlap.

1. The reformers of the sixteenth century were tired of some Christians considering themselves “holier than thou,” of higher stature than others. That the Pharisee stood proudly looking down on those he considered sinners was mirrored in the belief held by

many that Priests were closer to God than the rest of humanity. That was something Luther and his colleagues clearly rejected.

2. The Pharisee put his trust in what he *did*, in his fasting twice a week and giving one tenth of his income. The tax collector, on the other hand, presented himself to God with a contrite heart, put his faith in a merciful God and thereby demonstrated his dependence on his *faith*.
3. Apparently, the Pharisee did not think he had anything to confess. The tax collector knew better. The role of confession, and that a person can confess directly to God – and not through a priest or a saint – is at the core of the reformation.
4. The easiest “Reformation motif” can be found at the end of this passage from the eighth chapter of Luke when Jesus reminds us that “those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” If anything grated on the nerves of the reformers, it was the haughtiness, pomp and circumstance of church leadership in their day.

There are those who instead of calling it the Reformed Tradition would rather say *Reforming* Tradition, because are we are not still at work trying to lay claim to the truths of our faith? While faith might be a life’s journey that starts with a baptism as the one we celebrated today with Carrie, Nathan and Jacob and does not conclude until the end of our lives, the church is also on an ongoing journey towards the ways of faithfulness, peace, and harmony.

As the Apostle Paul reached the end of his life, he composed words that we find in some of his letters to his protégé Timothy. Paul could be called the *first* reformer, for his fight with the first century “powers that were” was just as intense – and just as frightening and life challenging – as was the fight faced by the likes of John Calvin, John Knox and Martin Luther fifteen hundred years later. You see, some of the original disciples (and they were sure to make the distinction!) did not like or trust Paul. As Saul, Paul had persecuted Christians, even assented to Stephen’s martyrdom, but the biggest problem with Paul was that he was going to let non-Jews into the faith. (!)

James and John, who led the Jerusalem “branch” of the church, and some of the other disciples insisted that to be a Christian, a follower of “The Way,” one had to follow Jewish customs, which meant eating as Jews did, and if you were a man, well, ... it meant allowing a non-anesthetized surgical procedure which an eight day old baby might quickly forget but which a grown man was going to take *very* seriously. For a number of years, Paul had to battle the “orthodoxy” of the original disciples. In the end, perhaps for pragmatic reasons, Peter mediated the dispute, but not before angry words were exchanged and feelings were hurt all around – some of which we can read in some of the earliest epistles. History demonstrates that Paul is perhaps the greatest reason for the spread of Christianity, for it was the peoples of the Gentile (that is non-Jewish) world that welcomed the saving grace of Christ in such large numbers that it eventually spread across the world.

Today we listened to some of Paul’s words as he approached the end of his life and the end of his ministry. We heard some words of distress, but the ringing words are these:

... the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the LORD, the righteous judge will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all

who have longed for his appearing. ... the LORD stood by me and gave me strength, so that though me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. The LORD will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

In the end, the message of the Reformation is about all of us, together and individually, in relationship with our God. Unhindered by hierarchy, invited to listen to God as God speaks to each of us in Scripture and through all of God's creation, we humbly present ourselves before God and promise to work for God's justice and reign on earth. As Christians, we are called upon to express our praise and love of God first and foremost in what we believe, but also in how we care for all of God's people, and what we do in ministry and mission.

I return to "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and an expression of love that might, in a small way, remind us of the unfettered and unconditional love we would have for a God Who loves us unconditionally. A poignant dynamic to the production of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" was that Spencer Tracy, who played the role of Sidney Poitier's future father-in-law, was dying. Everyone in the cast and crew knew it. There were even two scripts. The more optimistic one included Spencer Tracy's role. The pessimistic one was composed without him. The first time I watched the movie, I, as a fourteen year old didn't know Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were an "item." I didn't know he was dying. I recall my tears at the intensity of the emotions of those two actors that played a married couple in the movie and were lovers in real life. Gruff on the outside, Mr. Tracy brooded and drank heavily whenever he thought Katharine Hepburn has abandoned him, but Spencer Tracy's expression of love for Katharine Hepburn in the closing lines of the movie is as poignant as any publicly aired. In retrospect, we realize he wasn't acting at all. He knew how close he was to the end of his life and before the whole world he expressed his feelings for the love of his life. ... Mr. Tracy died seventeen days after the filming of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" was completed.

That reminds us of how fragile and frail is all of human life, but we need not be at the end of our lives to know it is high time to express love of one another and certainly our love of our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God who loves us no matter who we are. Today we are reminded that all of us are part of a reforming faith, that calls more and more people to faithfulness, challenges the haughty, lays claim to the ways of humility and in all things rises above the strife and hatred of the world and instead professes the wonder of God's gift we call love.

Amen.