

“Reformation Sunday”

Matthew 7:1-5

October 28, 2018

While Thanksgiving is a time of year when the buttons pop off the chests of all self-respecting Congregationalists because of 1620 and the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock, the final Sunday of October, a lot of people believe, generally belongs to the Lutherans. But just as Thanksgiving is now a holiday that we all honor, whether we are descendants of Pilgrims or Puritans or anybody else, Reformation Sunday now belongs not only to Lutherans, and not just to Protestants, but to Christians of all stripes and descriptions. Because we all acknowledge that reformation comes in many guises, in a variety of forms, with a host of ideals. And it is necessary to us all as believers.

Luther wasn't the first Christian to wish the reform of his church. It was Saint Augustine of the fifth century A.D., long before the Catholic church knew itself as Roman, and long before there were any Protestants of any variety - it was Saint Augustine who proclaimed to the entire Christian world, both in the West as well as in the East (where Christian churches would eventually call themselves Orthodox) that the church must always - always - be about the business of being reformed. Saint Augustine knew that only God and God's truth are unchanging. And even if God's truth is unchanging, we mortals need to constantly adjust our lives in order to exemplify how unchanging truth can be made manifest to a changing world. Indeed, our lives together as believers require us to be constantly in a state of self-improvement. And this drive for change is not just institutional, but applies to us as individuals, as well as applying to our separate congregations, our civil communities, our nation, and for the world at large ... because reform was

not accomplished in one act or one step taken in 16th century Germany, just as a life-long pilgrimage is not completed in our first faltering steps. It is the journey of reform that is important, because the end goal of perfection will never be arrived at, at least not until the second coming of Christ himself. But that doesn't mean that in the meantime we are to do nothing. On the contrary. And Luther, along with Calvin and Zwingli and so many others, knew that as well.

We all know the story, or we used to know the story, indeed we should know the story, of how a monk named Martin drew up 95 discussion points to be aired among the faithful. Luther brought to light some very real problems in the church of his day, and it is fairly clear that Martin knew that one meeting of the deacons, or of presbyters (that's a fancy word for ordained clergy serving local churches), or of bishops, or even the college of cardinals, was not going to solve everything that he and many others saw as wrong with organized religion as expressed in the church in 1517. And here we are, over 500 years later, still dealing with some of the same issues that were raised back then in Wittenberg, where the 95 theses were nailed to the door of the local church.

Yes, Reformation takes time, time that is not measured in the three-score-and-ten of any one individual's life - and it has not come easily to Christianity. Swords were drawn - literally - with tens of thousands shedding blood in the name of Christ during the great wars of religion that broke out in the wake of reformation. Tens of thousands dead in the name of the Prince of Peace: I wonder if that irony was lost on any of the combattants back in Luther's day!

Elements within the western Church struck back with what is now called the Counter-Reformation, which not only tried to negate much of what Luther sought, but to its credit also offered other kinds of change from within. Yes, reform has

been inevitable - though it has been uneven, and halting, in some places regressive, in other places excessive. But when considering reform, I am reminded of an old gospel hymn, "Standing in the Need of Prayer." It's not just "the other guy" who needs reforming: It's me, it's me O Lord - not my brother not my sister ... not the deacon not the preacher (well, in this case, the preacher IS in need of prayer too!) ... not my father not my mother. It's me, standing in the need of prayer.

Do any of you remember the comic strip character Pogo? In one of his most famous sayings, Pogo admits that "We have met the Enemy, and He is Us" because none of us is unblemished, even if every one of us considers ourselves to have the best of intentions. For we cannot remove the speck of sawdust found in the eye of another until we have removed the tree trunk that is found in our own eye, obscuring our vision of what God has in mind for all of us, both individually and collectively. And even when we're ready and able to be "our brothers' keeper," our progress is more evolutionary than not. Instantaneous change coming in the form of a sudden, bright light on the road to Damascus is something that God does; we humans usually take a bit longer in our struggles to embody the ideals of the man of Galilee.

So what does Reformation mean for us here today? What aspects of our lives, as members of Colebrook Congregational Church, need correction? I don't know if we will ever have a complete answer to that question, even if we come up with 95 theses of our own to nail to the door of our Thursday evening Adult Education class, because the challenges that we will face tomorrow may require a future transformation of our congregation in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine now in 2018. Similarly, what aspects of our lives as individuals need to

be examined critically to see how well we conform to the ideals which Christ made incarnate?

This Sunday marks the completion of one year preaching in this pulpit. As you know, as your Pastor I have made the conscious decision not to tell you what to do, or tell you what to think. However, I hope to help us all to ask ourselves the right questions. So allow me to ask, once again:

What aspects of our lives as individuals, and as a congregation, need to be examined critically to see how well we conform to the ideals which Christ made incarnate? Will the challenges of the Christian life be any different five years from now? In fifty years? In 500 years?

No matter what faces us in times to come, Jesus - as the greatest Reformer of all - stands beside us to rescue us, to transform us, to rejuvenate us, to guide us, to assist us. For it is the great insight of the Christian faith, what we uniquely offer to a world that has found peace and righteousness so elusive, that it is through Christ that our relationship with God is restored and renewed. May we live lives reborn, worthy of the efforts of Jesus to assure us of his Father's love, through which we will be brought, one day, into his heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray.