

Sermon Notes 10.30.2011 Receiving and Reforming

Somewhere about 1720, almost 400 years ago, a young man and his 2 brothers left their small village in Germany, set sail and traveled months in sometimes treacherous and always crowded conditions, with much illness and little food, and yet, disease and even death all around them, they pressed on to a land of promise, to Pennsylvania, one of the American colonies in the new world.

I am so grateful that they weathered the storms, navigated the seas, and persevered through so much because that man is my 7th great-grandfather, Heindrich "Henry" Heilig and without him making that trip, I might be a lot of places this morning, but it would most likely not be here! And I might not even be!

But, what would make these Heiligs endure hardships unimaginable to us? What persecution was so terrible that it turned them to seek a promise of refuge? ...It was religious persecution. This part of my family lineage were devout Lutherans who were discriminated against, arrested, physically harmed, for their faith.

In Western Europe, the only church was the Roman Catholic Church, until the year 1517, when a young priest, Martin Luther, posted 95 theses – 95 reasons he found the church to be relying on legalism and not love - on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany, which resulted in the Reformation, the splitting of the

Lutheran and eventually, other Protestant churches, from the Roman Catholic church.

You see, Martin Luther, in his study of Scripture, began to find what he learned there differed from the traditional beliefs of the church. He became convinced that God never, ever leaves us, always looks for us, always loves us. And he became very concerned that the beliefs and practices of the church did not reflect this, but seemed to be binding the people. He most objected to the sell of indulgences to parishioners which were supposed to give forgiveness.

That is what precipitated his posting of the 95 Theses, which changed the course of history. And the Church – well, they did not like it one bit! Luther was thrown out of the church, sentenced to death and had to go into hiding. His followers were excommunicated or worse. Those in the Reformation movement – the Protestants - protested clerical corruption and church hypocrisy. People had had enough of religious authoritarianism, exploitation and abuse...

And that is exactly what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel story today, as he launches into a weltering tirade against the practices of the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of the day, about how they value rules over relationship, burden the people rather than blessing them, are about what looks good instead of being good, worry more about privilege and prestige than practicing what they preach.

For Jesus, faith leads to a transformed life of love, where serving and sharing are the order of the day, where there is only one Creator to whom all honor and praise is due, who accepts and affirms everyone equally, to whom everyone has access and needs no interference run for forgiveness or anything else.

We are all a part of the church because God's love is so radical that it includes us all, no matter who we are, who we love, who our family is, what education we have, what language we speak, what we do for a living, what race we are, what abilities we have, how old we are – we are all a part.

And that means that church is not just a social club. We don't get to say who is in and who is out – that, however, is no excuse for bad behavior! And we are not just accepted, but affirmed. And not just affirmed, but included, in the life of the church. Our gifts are all needed – church is not a spectator sport or a commodity to be consumed, but a community of love to be lived in!

That's why Jesus calls his followers to serve and share; why Luther called the church to reform; why we remember these stories: to remind us to always be reforming our lives, our church, the church, to be the community created called by God.

Even Jesus calls his followers to listen to the scribes and Pharisees, to hear the stories, to be reminded of where they have been and how God has been with them. Part of what Luther called the

church to was a return to Scripture and the stories there, to be reminded of God's grace for all.

We are called to remember all of these stories and the stories of our lives and the stories of our church to remember how God's grace has carried us through so our faith is confirmed as we move to the future. For this sermon series of Giving and Growing, each week we will hear from members of our congregation about what Joy means to them and why they give. Craig was supposed to be here today to share with us, but as most of you know, he has been in the hospital and just got out and is still recuperating. But, he sent his story to be shared:

“I attended Joy one Sunday and I was most likely still high from the night before as I was holding up the back wall and it was like a light went on in my brain. Rev Carol Trissell stood up there and what I heard was this: “ this is a story book of love for it is how God so loved his people and this book guides as needed each and every time one reads from it”! ..those are the words that changed my life forever! I wanted to be better for I found others who showed me that God does love me and all things are possible in and through God. So the real reason I want to say something is that I love this place and I do the things I do around here for me! I do them because when I am making the risers or cutting down that tree. I feel so close to God and my spirituality just hums!

I was lost and now I am found by the grace of God and Joy MCC I can walk with my head held high as well as I kicked many addictions. I no longer drink myself to sleep or do drugs just to feel something. I now understand that God loves me no matter what and will be always be my savior and guide even when I am not there for me. If not for Joy MCC I am sure I would not exist at this time for I was on the path to destruction. In closing I want to thank all the folks who have always been by my side as well as those who will always walk the path of Christ with me!”

The goodness and grace of these stories are a gift that we receive, even as we put pain in the past. We don't ignore that there may have been hurt, but we leave that behind to hold onto the good and grace, to find the faith to move into the future. These stories remind us of our call to inclusive community, to always be reforming to be closer and closer to that.

We need the gift of these stories more than ever, it seems, for we living in a time in which the church is in need of reformation. Church attendance is lower than it ever has been in America, people have lost trust in church leaders, and there are too many people preaching a gospel that doesn't deal with serving and sharing, but setting up who gets and who doesn't.

Like the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day and the church of Luther's day, too many practices of the church actually keep people from God rather than drawing them closer, or are actually abusive to people, instead of caring for them as God's people.

That's why we remember the stories. This church has stories of triumphs, of struggles overcome, of people helped, of lives changed...That is why we have worked on a time line, to remember those stories...of how Joy has been a leader in the community for 30 years – the 1st GLBT affirming organization to own property in Orlando, still the largest; the birthing place of The Center, HIV/AIDS organizations, Metro Business Association, even a local out city

councilwoman.

On this Reformation Day we remember the stories to remind us that we and the church are always being reformed by the Spirit's power. And so we do not just remember and receive the stories, but use them in our transformation and reformation. But, we have to be willing to continue the reformation process.

And, we need to...there are people out there that proclaim they spiritual and not religious and they don't need organized religion (to which I always ask, 'Who said we were organized?') because of all the harm and horrible things done in the name of religion, done in the name of Jesus. We can be a witness that there is another way, the way of love and life, the way of Jesus, that is spiritual and religious, about healing and wholeness...

In a poll taken a few years ago, young people were asked why they didn't attend church activities; the top 3 answers were because it is homophobic, judgmental, and hypocritical...We have a real chance to show there is a different way...

The question is will we dare to be different? Will we have the courage to continue reforming? One of the things that got Luther in trouble is that he would take popular bar songs and use their tunes as a platform for hymns to help people believe. Are we willing to use Lady Gaga if we need to? Can we let go of what we think church should do and be so it can do and be what God calls it to be? Are we

willing to think outside the box and move beyond the walls?

I think so. We have the gift of these stories we have received for reformation, that fill us with faith for the future. They are gifts from God for us to use wisely, as all gifts from God are. When we do so, giving of our gifts, we grow, spiritually and as a church.

Bishop John Shelby Spong reminds us: The church of Jesus Christ has constantly moved past the fences ...in its drive to become a universal community...

We have done it before and we can do it again...

So, we receive and share the gift of all of these stories for reformation of ourselves, our church, our world. Let the walls fall down! Amen.