

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

October 29, 2006 – Reformation Sunday

Text: Mark 10:46-52

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“Let Us See Again”

Reformation Day. Trick or Treat! ...Oops! Wrong day –or is it? Is there some tricking and treating to Reformation Day in the Lutheran calendar?

It's all trick if “Reformation” is just a noun. That's the long and short of it. As a noun, it is something in the past, which we can admire as part of the great human story. But even then, we must not lose sight of the fact that there were many other great civilizations writing grand chapters of the human story.

But Reformation ought to be construed as a verb, an ongoing reforming of the life of the church. Then it is a treat. Martin Luther's intellectual clarity of thought in the interpretation of Scripture was a new thread of the worn fabric of late Mediaeval European culture. Through the lenses of our 21st Century we can construe the eloquent assurance that Luther found for himself and for his generation in the words of St. Paul this morning, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

On those words Luther was rescued from his wrathful God. On those words a new sense of individualism coalesced. On those words nation states were formed as the ancient Holy Roman Empire broke apart and the newly defined Roman Church began its own reforms known as the Counter-Reformation.

But Reformation becomes just a trick again if we were just to celebrate that past to cultivate a sense of that angry God Luther felt. For then, except in some extraordinary cases of perverse ill will, we are tricking ourselves with this wrathful picture of God. People today are not asking, “How shall I stand justified before that angry God?” People today are asking questions such as, “Where is God? and, “What about the other religions and their Gods?” and, “How is religion even relevant and true?” Against those questions a new reforming of the church's language and life is to take place.

Indeed they are beginning to take place. The questions themselves reflect a new context for the church, a context so critical that I have used the Gospel for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost because it is so appropriate. Jesus cures a blind man because he is asking insistently for Jesus to open his eyes to see. This is what our Christian Churches have to ask on Reformation Day, “Teacher, let us see again.”

We need to be reformed by such a change of direction, so that God can give us the vision to speak of God to our secularizing communities. Except perhaps for those among us who have lived their whole lives in San Francisco, many of the rest of us represent the new rootless generations. For when we go back to our towns and neighborhoods –either little has changed, or in many cases, nothing much familiar is left. Almost everyone has left and our home church of memory is usually struggling to survive. This is a symptom of the new rootlessness of Western civilization for which the church has to be re-formed; to plead like Bartimaeus to Jesus, “Teacher, let us see again.” This is the treat we seek.

I came to America because the dissolving of the old certainties was well advanced and I have spent my life thinking and working and listening for the teacher's words. I don't know if I have heard them, but I have been given something to say that cannot all be said in this sermon.

It will take hours and I am not prepared to keep you here. Neither are you! (I bet that brings a sigh of relief!).

At my first meeting with you at St. Francis I was asked a question like, "What would I say about the Lutheran Church to a stranger who came to this church?" My answer was, "How can I help you?"

Now this was not a sly dodge to avoid defining what I believe. Just the opposite. The church has defined itself for too long by its own contexts, traditions and language instead of just being the church in its parish. For in the helping of some stranger, we both meet God and perhaps we will be able to see again how the fields are so ripe for harvest, discovering the language to communicate the Gospel anew. And that would be a treat.

Put another way, the Reformation is a verb and not a noun, so that the Lutheran 15th Century reforms were reforms of the Catholic faith in that time and place, not the creation of a Lutheranism. But the Roman Catholic Church at the time couldn't or wouldn't hear of these reforms as the Lutherans stated them and thus Protestantism and the state churches began.

Good Lutheran theology is by nature an ongoing restatement of Catholic teaching in the spirit of the Augsburg Confession –not Roman Catholic teaching because we have no such authority given their system of authority. Yet today even the Roman Catholic Church has begun to receive Lutheran teachings on grace and the Gospel when, in 1999, Martin Luther was recognized as a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Even those Lutheranistic certainties are dissolving.

What does this all mean? Many things, too many for one sermon. But, for example, it means that denominational loyalties are fading. The people are far ahead in this. People, from within and from without, are realizing that many of the doctrines of churches seem irrelevant, as if it is all a trick. We would say that each faith tradition is a movement, a charism, of the Holy Spirit at work. Instead of conjuring up Protestant-like certainties, we ought to consider we are blind as Bartimaeus when we try to behold other Christian denominations, let alone the Jews, Muslims and the other members of the family of religions. "Teacher, help us to see you in others."

If there is a loyalty to the Lutheran Church it is because a particular congregation and perhaps a larger entity is reforming and reshaping itself to speak to the times we are in. This is surely true of St. Francis and why many of us have joined. For St. Francis is creating part of the future Christianity. Yet there are many aspects of vision God has yet to restore in us. Still, we are showing how Christian faith and scientifically informed descriptions of human sexuality can be brought together as a living doctrine of creation for the whole church. This is in the spirit of historic Catholicism, under the rubric of Scripture and Tradition.

Perhaps now you can see how important your pledge of support at St. Francis really is. It's not about money, but about the stewardship of our ancient catholic and Lutheran values and beliefs for the emerging church of the 21st Century. Your pledge is also about caring for your spirituality and for our diverse San Francisco, but on this Reformation Day we emphasize your pledge is about our contribution to the future of the Christian Church.

Bartimaeus' faithful words, "Teacher, let me see again." are our words in a re-forming church, in our waiting on God to enable us to receive fuller vision, in just struggling to live out those words, "Teacher, let us see again." This is no trick, but a real treat. Amen

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