

## Faithless in Our Faithfulness

*...learn to do good....* Isaiah 1.17

*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'* Luke 19.8

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day set apart to remember the Protestant Reformation that began on October 31, 1517. It started 505 years ago when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Thesis to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church challenging corrupt practices within the church. A little over 200 years later a Dutchman, Jocodus van Lodenstein, started a second reformation, and he is thought to be the first person to use the phrase "the Church reformed, and always reforming," a byword for the Presbyterian Church today which was popularized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and expanded to say, "The Church reformed, and always reforming according to the Word of God."

Lodenstein believed there was a need for further reformation with the emphasis being, not on doctrinal correction, but on the correction of the lives and practices of God's people. The Second Reformation, as it became known in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was an attempt to apply the principles of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation of the institutional church to the reformation of individual lives. He espoused the belief that the Church was reformed, the institution was reformed, now individual Christians must also be reformed, for he said, "Doctrinal correctness was worthless apart from the moral and spiritual reform of the person."

It is somewhat amazing that the institutional Church reformed its doctrine and practices, but the personal piety of many members of the Church was left untouched. This was not altogether true; there were the Jesuits in the Catholic Church and the Puritans among the Protestants. The failure of personal piety was evident, however, in the religious wars that swept across Europe between Lutherans and Catholics, decimating the population with Germany losing close to 50% of its population. This was a "reformed" church that did this!

We Presbyterians were not without our faults, for King George III of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century made the caustic comment that "Presbyterians are a factious people." His observation was not without merit. I read once that Scotland, which is only 2/3 the size of Pennsylvania, at one time had over 2,000 Presbyterian denominations; in America today there are 31 Presbyterian denominations, many at odds with one another. This is the Presbyterian story! The church has reformed, but its people need to be reformed. Even though we have a strong ecclesiology on paper, our organizational structure has not been enough to prevent the Presbyterian church from splintering into numerous divisions. No organizational structure or system is better than the people who administer it. So, after more than 200 years of reformation, Jocodus van Lodenstein, a dutch preacher in the Netherlands, saw the need for personal reformation with "always reforming" referring to Christians growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He learned that institutional reformation without individual reformation is not enough. It just doesn't

do the job!

That's the message of Isaiah in our text this morning. The people are gathered to worship fulfilling the law in offering sacrificial bulls, lambs and goats, giving of tithes and offering, burning incense, and lifting hands in prayer, but listen to how Isaiah addressed this gathered assembly of God's people:

*Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers **of Sodom!** Listen to the teaching of our God, you people **of Gomorrah!***

*Rulers of Sodom, people of Gomorrah?* The people of God? That got their attention! Once having their attention, he goes on to tell them their acts of worship are unacceptable, they must,

*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good....*

*Learn to good!* God has exposed their faith**less**ness even in their faith**ful**ness. That sounds like an oxymoron if there ever was one, to be faithless in faithfulness. The ancient Hebrews got the forms of worship right: sacrificial lambs, burning incense, raised hands in prayer. Yet, they failed to practice the weightier matters of the law: justice in rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. They failed to take into account **the whole** counsel of God and were challenged by the prophet to *learn to do good....*

This raises a question for us, today. CCC has been a church reforming for at least 20 years now; we have discovered new depths of faithfulness. But, in what ways are **we** faith**less** in our faith**ful**ness? That's a question we must never stop asking. The individuals who are the Church as well as the institutional church need to be "reformed, and always reforming."

Our text this morning is about reforming, a good text for Reformation Sunday. Having exposed their faith**less**ness even in their faith**ful**ness, God offers the people, you and me, an invitation:

*Come now, let us reason it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

*Come now* is a command, but the language is in the form of a gracious and loving invitation revealing the tender manner in which God engages sinners. This brings to mind Jesus' gracious invitation to us:

*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give rest.*

He is responding to the burdens the teachers of the law had laid upon the people, but it is an invitation to any and all who are wearied by the burdens that weigh them down. Often the burden is our own sin -our faithlessness in our faithfulness!

*Come now, let us reason it out, says the Lord....* The fact is all sin is **unreasonable** no matter how we try to rationalize it. And, of course, to reason something out with God is to discover **Who is right** and who is wrong! Such reasoning can only lead to repentance! And repentance leads to a clean slate, for God said through the prophet,

*...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

In our text red is the color of unjustly shed blood! The blood shed by the ancient Hebrews is that of the oppressed, not that they actually took their lives, they caused them suffering -the orphan and widow- who were deprived of justice. So, even if our sins are blood-red, when we repent, they become as snow-white, that is, as though they never were.

However, we can't stand on yesterday's laurels. "The church reformed, and always reforming according to the Word of God" is a constant movement of the Holy Spirit, not just in the institutional Church, but also in our individual lives; it is never ending. We see the dynamic of "reformed, and always reforming" in the Psalms which lay out the unfolding of the life of faith from orientation to disorientation to reorientation:

-from *Happy are those who do not take the advice of the wicked* in Psalm 1

-to *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me* in Psalm 22

-to *The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want* in Psalm 23.

This dynamic continues to unfold from the beginning of the Psalter to its end. We also see it in the Apostle's Paul's letters in the New Testament,

-in the theology of John of the Cross, a 15<sup>th</sup> century priest and catholic reformer,

-in the observations of Adrian van Kaam, a 20<sup>th</sup> century catholic priest and psychologist,

-and in Dallas Willard's writings, a 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian.

It is a fact of life, whether we walk with Jesus or not, life is a continuous experience of orientation, disorientation and reorientation, in which we discover our faithlessness, the people of God, in our faithfulness. The Christian faith simply wants these experiences to reorient our hearts to Christ so that He has our minds, our souls, and our bodies and all faithlessness is gone.

We see the first part of this movement of the Holy Spirit in Zaccheus' life in his encounter with Jesus. He was chief tax collector, which means he was not just a tax collector, but a regional administrator who was in charge of tax collectors. He got rich by cheating people, exacting more from them than required by law.

He only wanted to catch a glimpse of Jesus, just a glimpse, but Jesus had more in mind and invited Himself to Zaccheus' house for dinner. He was a man shunned by all and Jesus invited Himself to his house for dinner; this was such a profound experience for Zaccheus we see immediately how his life was reformed for he said,

*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*

This is a man who truly came to know Jesus! To say his encounter with Jesus was a life altering experience is an understatement; he committed himself to getting rid of half of his "stuff" and giving the proceeds to the poor. Imagine our getting rid of half our stuff! And those he had cheated? He would pay them back 400%! What a story!

I would like to have read a sequel to Lazarus's story; he reformed, but being reformed was not, is not, enough, for we need to be always reforming, otherwise we become faithlessness in our faithfulness. That's the job of the Holy Spirit to do that work in our hearts. We participate in the practice of the spiritual disciplines. Without the continuous practice of spiritual disciplines, and the continuous learning of new habits of faith, old habits of the flesh slowly but surely reemerge, and along the way we convince ourselves that these worldly habits are of the Kingdom of God. We prove to be faithless in our faithfulness. This is without exception in our walk with Christ. Somewhere down that path we will prove to be faithless in our faithfulness.

When old habits of the flesh are not exposed and displaced with new habits of the Spirit, sin darkens the intellect and we actually are capable of calling good evil and evil good. If I continue to resist the conviction of the Spirit, God is ever faithful and eventually will allow me to suffer the consequences of my faithlessness. These consequences of sin can be used by the Spirit to open the eyes of my heart and bring me to repentance, so that I may abide in Christ and Christ in me -faithfulness

Today, Reformation Sunday, we remember the church is "reformed, and always reforming," not just the institutional church, but we the people who make up the Body of Christ -"reformed and always reforming." Let us open our hearts to the crucified Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to reveal the ways in which we are faithless in our faithfulness, and then we too can *learn to be good*.

*Come now, our Father invites us, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

That's what Jesus has done for us on the Christ, and we are to be like Him, faithful in all things!

