

Covenant Word

Always Re-forming

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-40

A momentous break-through occurred one night while at his desk in his monk's cell. He read Paul's words to the Romans: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained grace in which we stand." The fullness of this verse's meaning burst upon Luther as he realized that the church had it all backwards. You don't have to persuade God to be gracious by praying, by attending mass, by going to confession, by fasting and inflicting bodily pain. No, God is already gracious. God is already loving. God sent the only begotten not to condemn, but to save because of love. The simple realization that God is good, merciful, and kind shook the foundation of the medieval church and the social culture surrounding the church. (Buchanan)

It was the sale of indulgences that finally sent Luther over the edge. Indulgences, promising forgiveness and reduced time in purgatory, were issued by the church. You could purchase indulgences for your loved ones, and you could

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Pastor
Sunday
October 29, 2017*

Last weekend, I was invited to The Sacred Heart Monastery to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The Benedictine sisters hosted a panel of various speakers who were to highlight, in 10 minutes or less, the contributions that their particular denomination has given to the world. My task was to represent the Baptists, which I confessed to being too ironic as most Baptists would be horrified to find an ordained woman speaking with authority much less on their behalf! So I summoned my inner Fisher Humphreys and talked about Religious Liberty, baptism by immersion, conversionism,

autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of all believers. I even threw in four Baptist hymns thanks to the tutelage of Paul Richardson. I was grateful for the spirit of the day. The sisters imparted no judgment on our history of protestations from the Catholic Church, rather they celebrated our differences graciously.

Reformers are rarely received graciously. Rather they are branded as heretics and usually martyred for their new ideas that shake up established systems of religion. Take Martin Luther for example. He was an Augustinian monk, a priest and scholar. The faith offered by the church, however, left him terrified of a stern, judgmental God who was angry and anxious to send us into eternal torment. And so Luther prayed, fasted, went on pilgrimages, even participated in flagellation...climbing up long staircases on his knees...in order to earn God's favor. Nothing worked to bring him peace. (John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, "Stewardship, Reformation, and Amazing Grace," Oct. 30, 2011)

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purchase them for yourself. Salesmen traveled from town to town to hawk indulgences on the street corners. So when the salesmen came to Wittenberg, where Luther was a theology professor, Luther went to his study and wrote out a theological critique of indulgences and the entire system whereby the church seemed to be offering access to God's grace only if good works and prayer, fasting, alms giving and purchasing indulgences were performed. He then marched the 95 theses to the church where he nailed the theses to the Wittenberg church doors with an offer to debate them with anyone. The church was immensely displeased. Luther was excommunicated, and the Holy Roman Emperor was persuaded to condemn Luther as a heretic with a price on his head. Luther went into hiding at the Castle of Wartburg and spent his time translating the Bible into German so that people could read and understand scripture for themselves. (Buchanan) With scripture available to believers and a call against the church given, denomination after denomination developed, of which Baptists are one.

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**



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Maybe Jesus should have written down his concerns and posted them on the Temple doors. Instead, his reformation began when he himself was nailed to a cross as an example of his differences with the established religion for all the world to see. Jesus never let up from poking a stick at the Scribes and Pharisees. He constantly sparred with the religious elite trying to shake them loose from their predictable and safe assumptions. And so he told story after story about generous farmers and demanding hosts, of forgiving fathers and a child who shared a sack lunch. He wanted to teach the people that the scribes and Pharisees did not have a monopoly on God. They might have known what the scriptures said, but they were clueless in how to live it out. And so he kept telling them to look to the greatest commandment of all for guidance: Love God with all of who you are, AND love your neighbor as much as you love yourselves. Jesus knew that if we could open ourselves up to genuinely care for one another, to see one another through a lens of faith rather than a lens of judgement, then our eyes would be opened to the ways God works in the world to bring about new vision, change, reformation.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann says (*The Prophetic Imagination*) that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception [that acts as an] alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” It is what we do when we put our imaginations into play, and we get a glimpse of what the world might be like if we could only love God with all of who we are and our neighbors as ourselves. When we can enter into this sort of vision, we take on the role of reformers, because reformers provide an alternative vision of the world and work like crazy to bring the vision into reality. Our goal as reformers is to do our best to present and live into the new reality that God is bringing about in and around us. It is what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. It is what we pursue when we are involved in reformation. Sister Joan Chittister puts it this way: “Whatever we do, we do for a purpose larger than ourselves or there is no use [in] doing it at all. The real purpose of our lives is not for ourselves alone. It is to co-create the world.”

As co-creators, or reformers, we develop within an ongoing vocation of protest. While it is no longer against Rome, we are to question and critique everything like institutions, creeds, statements of faith, the church itself. I admit this makes me terribly uncomfortable. In addition to being an introvert who is never quick on her feet, I am also a good Southern girl who has been told about her “rightful place” repeatedly. I am finding, however, with age and the

realization of 35 ordained years, I am finding it harder and harder NOT to protest. I blame this on you as you keep lending me courage to find my voice!

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For instance, two weeks ago, we hosted a forum for an international organization called The Open Society. Representatives from around the world gathered in our Ministry Center to hear a three-person panel discuss how religion in the South affects our local and state politics. By my choice, I was merely the host and sitting in the back of the room. There was conversation about fear, specifically by white southern men who long for the good old days of the 1950’s when they felt that they had power and when women were appropriately submissive according to the Bible Belt culture.

One of the ministers on the panel immediately began a defense about how he encourages the women in his church to use their gifts, to take positions of leadership, to be all that God created them to be. Then he chuckled, “Oh yes,” he said, “I tell the Old Testament story about Baalam and how God used Baalam’s beast of burden (but he used the scriptural word which rhymes with “grass”)...how God used Baalam’s... donkey...to speak the truth to Baalam. My friends,” he pontificated, “if God can speak through an ass, then God can surely speak through a woman!”

In. my. Church. He. Said. This!

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The church and its leaders are always in need of reformation. Like any good, important work, it is never done. It crosses generations and if for no other reason, the children of this church deserve our endurance to pursue change that

guarantees integrity of faith. Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor of theology at Union Seminary in New York, said:

Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history, therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore, we are saved by love.

A modern day reformer was Martin Luther King Jr. On the

night before his death, he preached to a packed house at The Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, TN. By this time, King had already written from The Birmingham Jail, and he had already preached the "I Have a Dream" sermon from the steps of The Lincoln Memorial. Opposition to his leadership in The Civil Rights Movement put King in constant danger. So he was late leaving Atlanta for Memphis because the plane and all its contents had to be doubly checked, even after having the plane guarded through the night. The pressure to back down wore so strongly on King that he had a premonition about the danger he is in. His Memphis sermon references Moses as he stands on the highest point of Mt. Nebo to look out over into The Promised Land. Having wandered

I want to know that the Kingdom of God is not some future pie in the sky, but that right here, right now, God is actively at work through us to create the Kingdom of God.

through the wilderness for forty years and having endured all the murmuring of the Israelites, Moses is just inches short of the long-awaited entry into the Promised Land when God tells him: "You can see it, Moses, but you cannot go over there yourself."

This is what King is experiencing. He can see a new world where black children will join hands with white children. He can see changed hearts so that the nation's discord will become a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. He can see the fulfillment of the American dream where all persons are not just created as equal but treated as equals. He can see where his own children will be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. He can see it clearly and brightly, but he knows he won't live into it and so he says:

God's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

Isn't this what you long to hear and know? I do! I want to know that the Kingdom of God is not

In your bulletin, there is a slip of paper. One side has a door printed on it, but the back side is blank. I am

wondering about what you might nail to the doors of the church in protest or as an encouragement. What do you see when you look over into the Promised Land? How has the church re-formed/re-shaped you? What does church look like for the generations yet to come? What shifts in your soul because of your faith? Write your answers on the paper and like Luther, walk to the doors provided in the sanctuary to which you may nail your protests. Let it serve as a renewal of your commitment to this church as we work together as reformers of the faith.

The doors we nailed our theses on were scrounged up from warehouses and basements. They have seen better days, but then so has the church we seek to reform. I think it important for us to remember that when most people think of church these days, they see doors like these...worn out, in need of repair, irrelevant. So the question always comes to us as believers who delight in church: how are we reforming the church so that others might be brought to faith?

Perhaps there are those here today who wish to be reformed by personal faith. If you have a decision you wish to make public, then join me here at the front as we stand to sing the hymn provided in your bulletin insert.

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