

Let me begin with a true story. Several years ago I arrived late to the annual Christmas Bazaar at my church in Naples, Florida. Most years, as the Senior Minister, I was there at the opening of the Bazaar and would spend the entire day wandering the various rooms welcoming our guests and encouraging our volunteers. In that congregation the Christmas Bazaar was a big deal because the proceeds benefited the homeless and the hungry and our neighbors. Their goal was to raise over \$30,000 and with creative crafts, baked goods, art, food and a lot more, they usually managed that much or more.

Well that year, I arrived about an hour before closing time because of an out of town meeting. I managed to greet and thank most of the volunteers before ending up in the hall where a few of the men in the congregation set up their Trash and Treasure booth. When I walked in, the men who had spent the day on their feet were sitting in the corner of a room with mostly empty tables of the picked over remnants of mainly trash with few noticeable treasures on offer, but I browsed anyway. On one table I noticed a few pair of old binoculars, one clearly broken and another in a worn leather case. I opened the case and took out a small but surprisingly heavy pair of binoculars. I looked at the label and noted that they were Leitz binoculars made in Germany. I called back to the men and wondered if they minded if I took the binoculars outside for a look. They didn't care so I did, and as I focused them on a palm tree across the parking lot, I squealed with delight. I took them back inside and asked how much they were. Without leaving his seat, the man in charge said: "Five bucks," and went back to his conversation.

I took my new birding glasses home that night and discovered that the same binoculars list on EBay for over a thousand dollars and are described as 'probably the finest small binoculars ever made.' I treasure them and use them all the time. These are my \$5 miracle binoculars. (Hold them up)

Now, I tell that story today, because I think it's a parable about my personal faith and our faith tradition. Today we commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of one part of the Protestant Reformation. We remember that in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517, an obscure monk nailed 95 debating points to a church door. It was an invitation to a theological conversation from the learned to the learned. It was written in Latin. Most of the 95 thesis would mystify and confuse us today because they mainly concern who forgives whom for what, when, and how. But Luther opened a door and surprised himself by starting a revolution. When translated and multiplied by the new at the time printing press, his ideas mushroomed and upset the careful religious consensus that had dominated Western Europe for 500 years. His words helped people see a new relationship with God.

Like my wonderful German binoculars discovered in the trash, binoculars that help me see the wonder around, Luther found treasure in what was old and tired in the medieval world view and began a Reformation of faith and practice that has defined and shaped everything that has happened to Christianity in the last five hundred years. Within his lifetime, other Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin and dozens more, redefined the Christian faith in ways that still touch our lives today. Let me add a footnote here: The

United Church of Christ is I believe, the single Protestant denomination that carries in its DNA all of the major strands of the Protestant Reformation, we are a bit Lutheran, we are a bit Calvinist, we are a little Zwinglian as well. We carry a strain of the English Reformation in our history and we are also a little bit Anabaptist in our Christian Church heritage. I tell you that as an invitation to learn more of this interesting history in your own reading, but this is a sermon and not a lecture, so I have some other ideas to share.

Back to the binoculars! They are old, they were rescued from the trash, but they are only worth what they permit me to see and understand about my world and my life journey now and in the future. So here goes.

One of the ideas born in the Protestant reformation, an idea that our UCC tradition holds close and cherishes, is the idea that part of being a reformed Christian is to be continually reforming. That's where all that UCC talk about "God is still speaking" and "there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word" comes from. (Pilgrim Pastor, John Robinson) We cherish the Bible and lots of traditional ideas, but for us, the Bible is a guide and not a dictator and tradition is a touch point, not a tether.

A few years ago, a writer named Phyllis Tickle suggested the notion that every five hundred years or so, Christians need to hold a great garage sale and dump their worn out theological trash and embrace new ways of thinking about the treasure God gives in an attempt to see and experience what new things the Holy Spirit is doing in the world.

And I love that idea because I know that God is a moving target calling us into the future. And while some people questioned Tickle's theory of how history operates, I want to take her basic idea and offer a few suggestions for you to consider.

What should we keep and what should we dump? What religious ideas should we cherish and what should we abandon? Luther and the other reformers, especially Calvin talked about the sovereignty of God. I think that's a keeper because it prevents the rest of us from confusing our thoughts and our opinions and time bound cultural notions that often appear as racism, sexism, classism, and a dozen other isms with God and the image of God we bear.

When a church tells people who to love or limits love with a litmus test that separates me from the rest of humanity by dogma or doctrine that mimics the prejudices of a particular leader; that's surrendering the sovereignty of God to some inferior reality: preacher, priest or the bigot down the street. That is thinking that belongs on history's trash heap!

The reformers stressed the importance of faith over works. Luther's life was transformed by the idea that you could not work your way into heaven, but that the promise of abundant life was a free gift of God's love in Jesus Christ. That's an idea worth living for because there is plenty of conditional love on offer in the religious world and when somebody talks about love with strings attached, that's not love and that's not what Jesus had to say. Unless grace is amazing, it's not grace.

Look at what Jesus said and look at how he lived and get rid of the barnacles the church has encrusted itself with over the last twenty centuries to protect its authority, often male authority. Live like Jesus, love like Jesus and jettison the rest. Distill the essence of tradition into the essential oil of a lived faith. That essence is covered quite beautifully in our scripture lesson for today—love God, love your neighbor and respect yourself enough

to keep learning and growing. Don't trust me, trust a community praying and talking and caring for one another. Luther called it the 'priesthood of all believers' and that's an idea worth living.

Five hundred years ago Protestants and Roman Catholics forced uniformity and conformity of thought in the territories they controlled. And in the process fought long wars and caused amazing suffering. Freedom of conscience was stifled by the fear of change. Fling out the fear and bring on the freedom.

I don't think it matters how you worship or what type of music that you happen to like. I'm a fan of simple but there's nothing wrong with worship that isn't simple, if it renews and nurtures our lives toward engagement on behalf of Jesus in a world that is hurting. Style is time bound, substance is timeless. Cherish the substance that empowers active love.

In my mind there is no such thing as an individual Christian. People who talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are too often the same people who look the other way when it comes to loving others without condition. The whole notion of getting saved as some sort of test of Christian credibility is an American invention. Being born again may be a way to get elected in this country, but being born again daily with a humility that trusts God in all things and struggles to be a bit more loving day by day is an idea worth keeping.

About a thousand years ago, St. Anselm of Canterbury, an Italian monk who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury put forth the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This doctrine says in essence, that you and I crucified Christ by our willful sinfulness and that to satisfy an angry God for our sins, an innocent Jesus had to die as a substitute for the punishment we deserved.

And on that one doctrine, I think, rests all the gloom and doom and guilt that have enveloped most of the western Christian tradition for the past 1,000 years. It is this doctrine, sometimes wrapped in contemporary music or marketed in prosperity gospel pulpits, that lurks just below the surface in conservative churches all over.

You can hide it with seeker friendly music or upbeat preaching but it is still about guilt and shame and getting right with Jesus or God will get you! Now, you can force this idea out of the New Testament if you fish for it and many of us, first found one form of Jesus through guilt based preaching that scared us into a conversion experience—that happened to me, but I have changed my mind.

I have come to believe that fear killed Jesus, that hate killed Jesus, that small-mindedness and greed and political power trying to hold on to privilege, killed Jesus. An empire killed Jesus and empires of political and religious power when they work together still try to kill Jesus today. Look at some of the so-called religious arguments that are made against health care or freedom of choice or human rights and look at how people of color and the poor and the oppressed are victimized.

But Jesus will not stay dead despite the effort of lots of Christians attempt to keep him dead and safe in the past like grandma's old Bible sitting unread on the coffee table. Jesus is alive and there is this universal life force called love, as in "God is love", that was in Jesus and is in you and me and in the essence of the universe beyond all that we can

understand and know, that moves through us to bring change and hope and the promise of abundant life.

And when we sort that out and get thoughts like that going in our minds and souls, seeking in this faith family the presence of the God who's still speaking, we will discover that like it or not, we become part of what the Holy Spirit is up to for the next 500 years. Happy 500<sup>th</sup> Reformed and Reforming Anniversary! Amen.