

“REFORMING TOGETHER”

I Thessalonians 1:2-10; Romans 12:1-8

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The Reformation began for Martin Luther with his own struggle to become right with God. His first years in monastic life consisted of failed attempts to “mortify the flesh.” He would beat his body, deny himself basic necessities for life, and assign himself onerous tasks as a way to discipline body and mind in order to rise to a higher spiritual purity. He would look back at this period of his life and see it as an attempt to “earn his salvation.” He left that way of life behind when he came to understand the true nature of forgiveness in general and God’s forgiveness specifically. His experience of forgiveness as free and salvation as a gift led him inevitably into conflict with church authorities and practice.

The sale of indulgences, a kind of contract with the church that entitled the purchaser to certain amount of forgiveness from God, had become a popular vehicle for the church to line its coffers. Luther came to see it as more than just a scam by the church hierarchy to cheat the people out of their money; he believed it was an impediment to salvation and the true nature of discipleship as taught by Jesus.

At first Luther tried to reform the church from within, but the authorities were not interested in having this income stream dry up, nor did they care for Luther’s other charges of abuse committed by priests, bishops, and cardinals. Fortunately, Luther developed some powerful allies of his own and the Protestant Reformation was born.

Jan Hus, a priest from Prague, had made many of the same points as Luther about a century before. He objected to the practice of withholding the cup of communion from the people. The church had deemed anyone who had not taken up holy orders unworthy to receive the blood of Christ. Hus was convicted of heresy and burned at the stake.

A couple of centuries before that, a small group in Italy rejected the assumption that only men were suitable for ordained leadership in the church and began to involve women in significant leadership positions in their faith communities. The Waldensians still exist to the present day.

You can’t read the gospels without seeing a Jesus who is also very intent on reform. His teachings about Sabbath and criticism of the religious hierarchy for complicity with the Roman Empire are just two examples of his attempts at reform. In the Sermon on the Mount, he tells the people: “You have heard that it was said... you shall not commit murder, but I say to you....” There, he attempts to move Judaism from the rule-oriented faith it had become to one that emphasized the spirit of the law and the transformation of one’s character. Paul is making the same point when he urges the faith community in Rome to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds in order to discern God’s will for them, “what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The practice of “reforming” has been present in every generation of Christians since the church’s inception. In our own lifetimes within the Presbyterian Church, we have witnessed the return of women to ordained leadership. Slightly more than half of those graduating from seminary seeking a call to parish ministry are women.

More recently, after more than forty years of debate, we have ended our discriminatory policy of excluding people from ministry based on their sexual orientation. And only three years ago we gave clergy permission to officiate at same-gender weddings.

There are large segments of the global church that believe we are traveling the road of apostasy, but anyone who has followed the process closely knows that this is not accommodation to our culture, but the result of a well-thought, spirit-led, and prayer-filled struggle with scripture, faith, reason and tradition.

The church continues to be in the process of rethinking our relationship to the earth. More and more congregations are becoming earth-care congregations, explicitly taking on responsibility for the health of our planet. We no longer view the earth as an endless resource given by God to use any way we like. We are moving from practicing “dominion” of the earth to exercising stewardship for it.

We don’t have a specific proposal on the table yet, but we will very likely be installing solar panels in the spring or summer to replace some of the energy we currently get through Consumers. The Endowment Committee will begin exploring the possibility of moving our investments to “fossil-free” funds.

Reformation Sunday invites us to celebrate the history of the church reforming itself. We remember John Knox, the protestant reformer in Scotland through whom our version of Presbyterianism is descended. We remember John Calvin whose core belief in the “Sovereignty of God” shapes our understanding of faith and of God’s work in the world.

But we remember not just these leaders, but the communities of faith in which they conducted their ministries. The Protestant Reformation brought us the idea of the “priesthood of all believers,” but it wasn’t the pastor who introduced the idea that made it powerful. It was the communities of faith that took it to heart and practiced it with each other that turned it into a foundational operating principle of the church’s practice even today. Reform happens not when the ideas are put out there, but when the community adopts them for its own. Reforming is a “together” sort of process.

So Paul gives thanks to the church at Thessalonica for the manner in which they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God....” It’s a little awkward for churches in the “reformed tradition” that the word “reformed” hardly ever appears in the Bible. But the *idea* occurs throughout. Reformation is a kind of repentance, a turning away from practices inconsistent with God’s desire for our lives to practices that embody God’s will. The Thessalonians honored Roman gods, but when Paul and his companions visited them, they turned away from these idols to become followers of Jesus. The community

itself reformed. Notice that Paul singles out no leaders in his letters to them. Their reformation was the work of the community – reforming together.

Luther rejected the idolatry of greed that raised one group in the church over another and turned the free gift of God into an onerous burden that only the wealthy could escape. But it was the faith community's acceptance and enactment of this principle that reformed the church of which we have become beneficiaries.

Similarly, when the leadership of the Presbyterian Church turned away from the idol of male privilege, we did not immediately see its impact. Only as congregations embrace the ministry of women can the transformation become complete. In my work with the Committee on Ministry, I get to interact with a number of congregations in southwest Michigan. I can tell you that we are still working on this. In general women clergy continue to be judged more critically than their male counterparts. I've seen a lot of progress in my 30 years of ministry, but we are still reforming. Future progress depends on that word "together."

But we're not here this morning to dwell on the church's shortcomings. We are here to celebrate the reformation and to remember the many ways in which the church has turned from idols and transformed its life as it turns to follow and serve the living God. The things to celebrate are as many as the ways in which we embody the Spirit of God in this community of faith: the nurture and care of our members, our stewardship of the earth, our commitment to mission, our passion for worship, and our thirst for learning. These are aspects of our life together that we have inherited from the faithful of past generations.

On this Reformation Day, we remember these things. But if we want to honor the reformation, then we need to turn not to the reformed tradition but to the *reforming* tradition. It is the nature of faith that we are constantly turning away from idols to serve the living God. We do this as we continually rethink theology and attempt to discover what God is doing in the world today. We do this as we continue to experience the sacraments in new ways. We do this as we change structures of leadership that no longer serve the church well. We do this as we reflect on our experience of worship in which we seek to honor God and nurture God's people.

We don't like change, but it is the watchword of the "reforming" tradition. We can remember and celebrate the ideas and people that gave shape to the Reformation, but to really honor it is to be open and ready to turn from those things that have become idols and to embrace the living God who is present today and leads us into tomorrow. Amen.