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First Presbyterian Church
October 27, 2024
Reformation Sunday
Mark 10:46-52

God of grace and transformation, we come before you with open hearts, longing to be renewed in spirit and purpose. As we hear your Word in the story of Bartimaeus, grant us courage to see anew and to rise as your church reformed and always reforming. Help us hear your call to live boldly, with vision for the future you desire as we follow Christ in the path of love and justice. Through the guidance of your Spirit, may we continually seek and serve you, becoming a people made whole and holy in your presence. Amen.

“Living As Reformed Christians”

I am the “pizza mom” for the Homestead High School Spartan Alliance Marching Band. This illustrious title means that on the Friday nights there is a football game, I’m in charge of feeding pizza to about 125 band kids. At the last pizza night, a good friend of Charlotte’s called me over. “Mrs. Epling, or should I say Reverend, I had no idea you were a pastor!” He invited me to sit down and tell him all about First Pres, and then he told me about the church he attends and his favorite church songs (no hymns at his church). But what he really wanted to know, was what being a Presbyterian means. I’m embarrassed to say that I stumbled over my answer more than I should have. So today, on this Reformation Sunday, I thought it might be worth a little bit of our time, to say a little bit about what it means to be a reformed Christian.

It was October 31, 1517, when the German monk Martin Luther nailed to the parish church door the long list of grievances he had with the Catholic Church. Luther had 95 bones to pick with the Catholic Church and he named them all. He called them “theses”. And he chose October 31 to nail his grievances to the church door because he knew a lot of people would show up for church the next day, which was All Saint’s Day. All Saint’s Day was a popular day to go to church. Attendance was good. Many people would read his theses.

Now, Luther was a Catholic who didn’t have any intentions of starting a new church. What he wanted to do was reform the Catholic Church, the church he loved and served. But he’d grown to believe that some of what the Church did and believed had gone astray, so he wanted to set it straight.

Chief among Luther’s grievances was the selling of indulgences. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church taught that after someone died, their soul might go to a place called purgatory, which was a place of spiritual cleansing people went to before entering heaven.

The church offered indulgences as a way for people to reduce their time in purgatory by performing certain acts of faith like prayers, pilgrimages, or acts of charity.

However, this practice took a troubling turn when the church began *selling* indulgences. In other words, instead of just earning their shortened sentence through good deeds, people could pay money to the church for indulgences. It became like buying forgiveness and this led to abuse, with some church officials aggressively selling indulgences to fund projects, like St. Peter's Basilica.

Martin Luther and other reformers saw this as a serious problem. They argued that no one should have to pay for God's forgiveness because it is freely given through Jesus Christ. Luther insisted that we are not forgiven because of anything we do – including the selling of indulgences or doing good works. Instead, we are forgiven because of who God is.

His objections marked a turning point that led to the Reformation, as reformers like Luther and John Calvin sought to return to what they believed were the true teachings of Scripture.

And so, if I were to explain what it means to be a Presbyterian, I would say that we believe, among other things, that there is nothing we need to do to earn God's love – because God's love is freely given to us no matter what. And we call this grace.

On Reformation Sunday we return to this core belief: that God loved us first, and God continues to shower us with grace and mercy.

But Reformation Sunday is about more than looking back. It also asks us to look forward and challenges us to do better – to do something with that grace and mercy. I'm sure you've heard the Presbyterian motto, "The Church Reformed, Always Reforming," which means that the church isn't a finished product. Instead, it's constantly growing, learning, and finding new ways to follow God's call in a changing world. It's a reminder that while the church is rooted in its history and traditions, it must be open to change when God leads it to do so.

Imagine it like tending a garden. You don't just plant once and leave it; you keep watering, pruning, and planting new things to keep it healthy and growing. Similarly, the church is always "pruning" or reforming, which is to say making adjustments to stay true to God's Word and mission.

Which leads me to Bartimaeus, the blind beggar we meet in Mark's gospel story that we heard earlier. In this story, Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus, asking to see, and his persistence and faith are rewarded. In many ways, Bartimaeus represents the spirit of the Reformation: seeking truth, yearning for new vision, and not shying away from asking for transformation, even when it's disruptive. Indeed, Bartimaeus just might be the reformer we need right now.

A little bit of back story as to how we got here . . .

Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd have gathered in Jericho. We don't know why, just that they have been there and are getting ready to leave. Upon leaving, they run into Bartimaeus who is a blind beggar sitting at the side of the road.

Somehow, Bartimaeus gets word that Jesus is coming, so he yells at the top of his lungs "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Well, the crowd and disciples hear him because they sternly tell him to zip it. Be quiet, they yell at him. We don't know why they tell Bartimaeus to shut up, but it probably has something to do with the fact that he's a blind beggar, and they are far too important to waste their time with him.

And I'm not sure how you feel, but I find myself rather startled by Bartimaeus's fearlessness. What inside him made him know he could claim his voice? What was it in his own personhood that refused to listen to everyone around him who was trying to keep him quiet and put him in his place? How did he get to be so fearless? Did it come from his parents, the teachings of his faith community, or a small group of friends?

We may not know how he came to be that way, but we do know that his fearlessness caught Jesus' attention. In response to Bartimaeus's tenacious refusal to keep quiet, Jesus stopped dead in his tracks. I love that detail of this story. Jesus stood still, Mark writes. Now for Mark to halt the action means something of substance is happening, for as you might remember, Mark's favorite word in the whole world is the adverb immediately. Everything happens immediately in Mark. The whole Gospel feels like it is rushing forward towards Jerusalem at top speed. So for Mark to report that Jesus, after hearing Bartimaeus's cry for mercy, stood still—it's like Mark took a yellow highlighter and wrote "Pay attention here" in the margins. So let's do that.

Jesus tells the disciples to bring Bartimaeus to him, and I love what they say to him because I think it's so instructive for us – the church – today. "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you." That's what they tell Bartimaeus. "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you."

Friends, the church (the church with a capital C) desperately needs a "be encouraged, get up, he is calling you," kind of reformation. A reformation with courage and heart at its center, that doesn't sit there silently, but answers God's call to resistance and persistence and then follows along the way. I imagine that "Take courage, get up, he is calling you," were words that Luther might have heard reverberating in the margins of Rome. Anyone willing to stand up to rejection, to keep on persisting in the face of rebuke, knows what it means to

maintain a reforming spirit because the voices of resistance to reformation are always loud and strong.

“Take heart,” is both an encouragement and a reminder that the church, even while grounded in centuries of tradition, is called to courageous, renewed faith. Reformation Sunday isn’t only about celebrating a past courage; it’s about embracing our call to transformation; and to ask, as Bartimaeus did, for new sight, new understanding, and new ways of being the church.

“Get up.” This command moves Bartimaeus—and us—from a place of waiting to a place of action. We, too, are invited to stand up and move toward God’s calling. The Reformers took action, believing that God was still calling them to uncover deeper truths, and to clear the path for a more authentic relationship with God. In every generation, the church is invited to “get up,” not to stay in what is comfortable or familiar, but to rise and continue the work of transformation.

“He is calling you” reminds us that reformation—whether in Bartimaeus’s life or in the church’s—is not about human achievement but about divine invitation. Just as Bartimaeus was called personally by Jesus, we are continually invited by God to new expressions of faith, mission, and community. And this calling is ongoing; it is God’s Spirit leading us forward, opening our eyes to new ways of love and justice.

So what does this look like? It could mean that we recognize an ecological God instead of an economical God. It could mean believing in a creational God instead of a transactional God. It could mean a reformation that doesn’t listen to the loudest voices, those voices that simply support the idols of prestige and privilege, of patriarchy and power, but challenges those voices, insisting that the Gospel word is the liberating word that might truly save the world.

Friends, maintaining the status quo is not the nature of the church. The Gospel always upends that which has been deemed acceptable by the masses. The Gospel demands to be heard even when rejection is sure to be the response. And the Gospel insists on the fact that the shaping of moral imagination is its duty.

When we give up that responsibility by choosing fear over good cheer, or staying seated instead of standing up, or turning away from God’s call because that call might jeopardize broken and dysfunctional systems . . . when the church forgets this, well, then it no longer has any business being church.

I want to close with a bit of history about a reformer I had never heard of until yesterday. Not surprising though, considering the church has long tried to silence the voices of people at the margins.

Her name is Argula von Grumbach. She lived from 1492-c.1554, and she wrote forcefully in defense of the Reformation, becoming the first published author among Protestant women.

In 1523, von Grumbach gained notoriety in elite circles when she authored a letter challenging the arrest of a former student at the University of Ingolstadt. We will call the student Seehofer, and he was arrested for teaching Luther's views. Von Grumbach addressed her published letter, "To the honorable, worthy, highborn, erudite, noble, stalwart Rector and all the Faculty of the University: When I heard what you had done to Seehofer under terror of imprisonment and the stake, my heart trembled and my bones quaked. What has Luther taught save the Word of God? You have condemned him. You have not refuted him." She then went on to cite over 80 scripture passages in defense of her Reform views, and she directly challenged the University theologians to a public debate with her on the legitimacy of their conduct in persecuting Seehofer.

Her published letter provoked a huge reaction. To have a woman call out eminent theologians and challenge them to a debate was unheard of. In the new age of the printing press, von Grumbach's views spread quickly, and the letter went through 14 printed editions in two months. Critics and opponents slandered von Grumbach, calling her a "shameless whore" and a neglectful wife and mother. The University theologians wanted the "silly bag" punished, and von Grumbach's husband, who remained a Catholic, lost his administrative post for not properly controlling his wife. In the end, University authorities ignored her challenge, and no public debate occurred. But Von Grumbach's voice lives on through her writings. As she concluded toward the end of the letter, "What I have written to you is no woman's chit-chat, but the word of God."

Friends, like von Grumbach, let us on this Reformation Sunday hear the words—"Take heart; get up, he is calling you"—as an invitation to celebrate our history and to courageously look forward. Let us, like Bartimaeus, ask Jesus for new vision, that we may continue the work of being a church reformed, and always reforming.

Amen.

Sources:

Presbyterian Historical Society, Reformation Sunday 2024

"Reformers in our Midst", Karoline Lewis, October 22, 2018

