

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 26, 2008
Reformation Sunday and the Reception of New Members
Lessons: Exodus 33:1-3,12-17 and Matthew 4:18-22; 23:1-12

TAKING A WALK TOGETHER

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation changed what it meant to be a church member, and so it is fitting to welcome new members into First Presbyterian Church on Reformation Sunday. It was almost five hundred years ago that Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for church reform to start what he hoped would become a discussion within the church seeking to fix problems and help church life and ministry evolve into forms more faithful to Jesus Christ and his gospel. Instead, conversation quickly devolved into anger and conflict that split the church. As the new Protestant churches emerged, almost no group's hands stayed clean. Doctrinal disputes became tribal animosities, and Christians died for their faith at the hands of other Christians.

Recently, I have been reading some short books on the life and history of the Amish and Mennonites whose various groups descend from Reformation era Christians called Anabaptists, because they would re-baptize believers into their fellowship. As Presbyterians, we do not accept the idea of re-baptizing people who have already been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and so we have welcomed two new members this morning without asking them to be baptized a second time. We affirm the unity of Christ's church, even in its sometimes bitter diversity, and so accept Christian baptism administered by another church. So, while I would say the Anabaptists were not right to insist upon re-baptism, I certainly would not suggest they were wrong enough to inspire the hatred that led to the slaughter of so many. How could Christians kill each other in the name of Jesus Christ over a sacrament? It is a dangerous thing for human beings to think they are so right and believe themselves so favored by God and so firmly in possession of God's truth that they will self-righteously scorn, hate, and even kill each other.

The bloody years that followed the Reformation seem like ancient history to us now in America's climate of religious freedom. Still, we need to realize that the rage of the self-righteous and the preaching of hatred are never far beneath the surface of human zeal for some version of virtue and truth that undergirds their power and authority.

Recently, a friend of mine complained about self-glorification in his profession, as though he and his colleagues were supposed to be the masters who imparted healing and

wholeness downward to less competent people. In contrast, he wished the healing relationship could become one of “taking a walk together.” In his view, the healer is also journeying toward greater wholeness; in fact, he would not call himself a healer. Expertise is not denied and need not be. What is denied is superiority, so that people may walk together toward healing and life.

My friend’s vision of his own work corresponds to Martin Luther’s vision of the church in terms of what Luther called “the priesthood of all believers,” the idea of which is not, as we might be tempted to think, our modern “every man for himself.” A shared priesthood generates a community of mutual support, intercession for each other, and shared experience of God’s forgiveness. I strongly suspect that too many Christians find themselves feeling isolated in some personal trouble, as though they stood alone in a group of spiritually strong and untroubled believers. It is not comforting to be “the one with the problem,” whether the problem is trouble of one’s own making or just a circumstance of life. No one wants to feel like the sick, broken, or unsuccessful one in the group. Certainly, no one wants to be the exception to the group’s righteousness, the one who is guilty or shameful. The priesthood of all believers disavows the isolation of the individual who needs to make confession and be healed. Instead, we walk together toward healing and wholeness, upholding each other in a community where no one is without sin, without trouble, without grief, without daily need for God’s grace.

When Jesus tells us not to call anyone on earth our “father,” he is not talking about our literal parents but about fathers and teachers in the sense of their becoming our masters. Have no master on earth who dominates your life or does your thinking for you. In the same spirit, Jesus says, those who would lead in the church must step forward as humble servants, not as dictators of faith and practice. We walk together, learning from each other as we learn from Jesus Christ and experiencing life in mutual respect.

Humble leadership is not something to which we are accustomed, and adjusting to it requires concentrated effort, not only at learning new ways, but at unlearning old ways so we can accept shared responsibility. Humble leadership is shared rather than imposed, and shared leadership spreads responsibility. Many religious people in this land of the free have gone from being unquestioning believers to becoming consumers, shopping for styles that suit their fancies. While some branches of Christianity have become aggressive to the point of belligerence, the more settled churches have moved toward being passive-aggressive. *I’ll be there if I feel like it and nothing better comes up. I’ll listen as long as it makes me feel good. I’ll see what they have to offer and take what I want.*

Through our visioning process, we are striving to develop church life, ministry, and mission as “taking a walk together,” following the call of Jesus. We have, therefore,

consciously sought to avoid negative motivations so popular in religion: guilt, fear, and shame. We need, also, to avoid the falsely positive motivations of flattery, which feeds egos, and “cheap grace” which deludes people into thinking God just makes everything right for Christians who don’t really care much, know much, or do much in their discipleship.

Jesus criticizes the religiously superior of his day for piling burdens onto other people’s shoulders without lifting a finger to help them carry the weight. Freedom in Christ does not come from burdensome rules and regulations. Neither does freedom in Christ come from letting someone else make all the effort and do all our faith-thinking for us. To be a church in freedom, without needing fear, guilt, or shame to motivate us and without requiring flattery, we need to walk together, think and talk together, work together, and care deeply about our own spiritual development and that of the church as a body.

When I was in junior high school, four of us went up to a much larger and heavier classmate who was sitting as he waited for the bell. At someone’s suggestion and with his consent, we used one index finger each to lift him easily up into the air. Just four fingers, but no one of us could have lifted him so easily, if at all, using both hands with all ten fingers. It took four of us. That’s a parable for our being Christ’s church.

Richard and Steve, welcome into the membership and community of First Presbyterian Church. We do not ask you to go ahead of us. Neither do we ask you to tag along behind us. We invite you to walk with us, as we seek to follow Jesus Christ together.

Moses refuses to lead the people of Israel toward the land promised unless God goes before them and God’s presence is with them. We need to understand that we don’t just walk together as a band of stout-hearted men and women. We walk by faith, not by our own collective strength. We need what the Bible calls the “knowledge of God.” That knowledge is relational, but it is also rational and inquisitive. We need to learn together to ask questions that matter to Jesus Christ, that probe issues from the viewpoint of God’s concern for human healing and wholeness. Our faith-thinking needs, not only to make sense to us, but also to make sense for God.

Our Visioning Team is trying to keep the conversation going about our beliefs and hopes engaging as many as possible in thinking the faith so that together we can walk by faith and represent the grace of Christ to people in our communities and our world. We seek neither to shame nor to flatter. We offer neither guilt-trips nor casual approval, because we know our own need to be forgiven. We will neither try to scare people with hellfire nor falsely suggest God does not care how we live. What we know, in part, is God’s healing, redemptive love. We need to keep going forward. So, let’s take a walk together. Amen.