

The Continuing Reformation--Message for 1 November 2015

Greeting: Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther wrote two beautiful statements of faith and trees, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree" and "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." Let us sing the powerful reformation hymn he wrote:

1st Hymn, no. 239 in green book--A Mighty Fortress is Our God

Our first reading today, on what for some is Reformation Sunday comes from **Martin Luther** who was a seeker in the early 1500s, in a time of social trauma and personal anxiety, as the contemporary theologian, Martin Marty has written. I must acknowledge that he was a deeply flawed thinker when it came to the struggle of peasants and in his twisted view of Jewish people. He did launch the liberating movement of the human spirit that is called the reformation. Luther wrote: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified... Everything that is done in this world is done by hope."

And those leading the Reformation found comfort in the verses like these from **Ephesians 2:8 and 3:16-19** that put us together with all the saints on All Saints Day today: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" ..."I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts

through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

As more and more thinkers had access to the Bible and built up schools of thought in the reformation, they started to be named things like Lutherans and Calvinists. Quakers rejected quite firmly this link to one person’s interpretation, however helpful, and refused to be called Foxites. The reformation continues.

Martin Luther also wrote: “Beautiful music is the art of the prophets that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us”

2nd hymn “Valiant for the Truth” no. 255 in the green book.

Joys and Concerns

Dear Friends—We commend to sacred care and healing, love and support, thanks and hope, all of those we raise up here in fellowship and privately in our hearts. Let our sainthood be formed and reformed by the Light of Truth within and make it shine for others, even when we ourselves may not be seeing it in us. For in that reflected glow, that noticing, that response, we may find the comforting warmth that touches our own hearts when we touch others. Yes, let blessings flow, and let them be recognized in all people, for each light matters. Let us be seekers of and for each other, not just seeking to satisfy an individual spiritual hunger or thirst, but to find bread for the world, to carry that cool dipper to those lost in the desert. Only connect. Only love can bear us safely home. Amen.

Luther also wrote: “To be a person of faith without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” Our third hymn is one written by a friend and is a round. It’s on the handout, “That Soul Prays”, we’ll try it a few times. I’ll sing the first verse, then you join me from the first to sing all three, then we’ll try all three again as a round, and maybe someone will be brave enough to add the descant—that last two lines.

Children are free to head downstairs in community of youth.

Message:

Dear Friends—So, it has not been the tradition of the Society of Friends to follow the liturgical calendar—to prescribe what message is for what day. In fact, it used to horrify me as a child to know that Grandpa Miller, who grew up in a Quaker community, never celebrated Christmas or Easter as a child, since every day was regarded as a day Christ was born as well as one on which Christ rose again. I knew that whatever the argument against these holidays is, both on simplicity grounds and theologically, it certainly did not mean that every day was a day for presents or candy. Perhaps symbolically, yes, but that did not sound very satisfying, and it made me happy for my mother’s Lutheran family, and especially the music there.

And yet, there is something to be said for both stripping down to the essentials while raising all to the transcendent. It is the refiners fire that makes gold pure. Without the distractions, the truth is more apparent and powerful. This is why I find it a powerful instance that all saints day and reformation day are united. Luther chose the holiday as a way to get his protest noticed publicly, but by claiming that the Truth of God is accessible to all, and not the exclusive purview of the church,

the priests, or the pope, he indirectly paved the way towards the final edge of Protestantism sometimes identified with Quakers, that all are saints, or rather that **in** all are the resources of saints.

We all have the means, perhaps even the obligation, to lead our own reformation. You know your context and God speaks to you there, in the place where your heart is, in the place where you listen, or where those around you can help you hear. It does not have to match the teachings of others, though it can be tested in the wisdom of the community, the communion of the saints. And in our empathy and relationships, we know enough of those around us, that the Spirit can move us on their behalf, which is why we sit together and share. Religion and the spirit are not individualistic—we walk this path together, not alone. We are shielded and protected within life by that of God, as our first hymn noted, and we need not fear. The militaristic imagery in *A Mighty Fortress* is about security, not aggression, about the forces Luther and Fox saw that are powerful negative forces in life, which is why we must be strong and focus on the Spirit, for on that we can rely. As Fox wrote to his parents in 1652, about 120 years after Luther, “Ye have no time but this present time, therefore prize your time for your soul’s sake.” We must answer the call of our era, just as those Valiant for the Truth do in our second hymn. And the positive power happens and emerges, as the third hymn notes, sometimes when we do not know it in a conscious way.

It is important, then, that we notice each other, that we deeply recognize each other. Last Saturday, I attended a large and moving “Black Lives Matter” event in Ithaca. It was all the more moving to me in the context of teaching my underground railroad seminar course right now. How do we accept policing as a lethal practice? How are some lives disposable, even as we

have the visual evidence in front of us? The answer right now is that for many with privilege and power, as reflected in the media reporting, certain people's lives do not matter to them. There are those who cannot think too deeply about the "collateral damage", or the people who somehow looked suspicious to a well-armed and muscular police officer or an antiseptic drone. God's voice comes from them, from those who were silenced, and from us.

I had a friend who was a gay male music teacher in the Detroit public high schools. Some of you know that Craig and I were the plaintiffs in the ACLU lawsuit in the state of Michigan for what were called domestic partner benefits at the time. Those cases were ultimately lost and in the court of public opinion, teachers are especially vulnerable. This teacher decided to leave with his boyfriend for Brazil. When I was part of a conversation encouraging him to stay and fight, he said, "I have **one** life". It is as a body, as a society, a society of Friends, that we have all of life—as a communion of saints—and all lives and voices are important, because we don't know where that still small voice will find its strength to come out and be heard.

"No time but the present", the words of George Fox, was the theme of the fourth world conference of Friends in 1967. The copy of the proceedings that was my grandfather's has one pencil mark in it—he was not one who ever wrote in books—but he drew a line along this paragraph written by Edward Swart, a South African Quaker:

"But despite our inability to enclose our message in an agreed and fixed form of words surely we do have a message which is very relevant to the modern world: The truth of God's accessibility in personal experience. The fact of human incompleteness apart from an open acknowledgement of

spiritual values. The recognition that spiritual acts are just as real as mental or physical acts. The realization that a genuine encounter with God brings with it a radical moral transformation. The knowledge that our love of God is revealed in our love for our fellow inhabitants of the earth, or not at all.”

Worship

Last Hymn comes from the red book: no. 274 “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Closing: Dear Friends—It is written in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, dear Friends, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Afterthoughts, thanks, introductions, announcements.