

And Now For Something Completely Different

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Pound Ridge Community Church

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day we commemorate the Protestant Reformation out of which Methodism was ultimately to blossom. The date marks what we think of as the beginning of the Reformation, October 31, 1517 when a young monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 complaints about the Catholic Church to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

You may have seen inspirational drawings of Luther, hammer raised over his head, defiantly pounding nails into the corners of his parchment. It's a powerful image, but the fact is that posting notices on the door of that church was a common way for the population to communicate. His truly courageous act was far less dramatic – he sent his list of accusations directly to Pope Leo X.

Luther was severely critical of the pope, questioning the validity of some of the sacraments and denouncing church corruption. He claimed that the church had begun requiring people to believe all sorts of things that had no basis in Scripture. His central claim in its simplest terms was that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by faith in the dogma prescribed by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The church had tried to make God fit in their box, but had gotten God all wrong.

Luther was ultimately joined by reformers all over Europe who shared his belief that the church needed to return to the plain meaning of Scripture. But they soon found that they were anything but agreed on the plain meaning of Scripture. And Protestants almost immediately began dividing into the countless denominations we have today, each of them believing that they are the ones who are finally getting God right.

But by and large, our record at trusting God enough to do things God's way isn't very good. There's a wonderful story about a small town that lay in a valley beneath a huge dam that was beginning to fail. The minister of the local church looked out the second-floor windows as the water began to rise. Suddenly, two men in a rowboat appeared and encouraged him to get in. "No thank you," the minister said. "I've been serving God for 40 years, and I expect God to save me!" The water continued to rise, and later, as he sat on the roof of the church, a rescue helicopter dropped him a rope. Again he cried, "I've been serving God for 40 years, and I expect God to save me!" When the dam had burst, washing away the church and the minister, he found himself before Saint Peter at the gates of

heaven. "I must admit I was disappointed," he said. "I served God for 40 years, and I expected God to save me!" Saint Peter looked at him, perplexed. "What do you mean? God sent a rowboat and a helicopter!"

Very often, what we think God's plan should be, and the plan God has in mind, are two very different things. God warns us that this will be the case in today's Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah, doesn't He? Listen again to the words: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:18-19) Pay no attention to the past, or to what you think you know about God, or the world, or how the world is supposed to work. God is doing a new thing. God is always doing a new thing.

And today's readings are timely as we consider the turmoil we are facing today as a denomination, trying to figure out God's mind with regard to human sexuality. You may not have thought about it in terms so grand, but what is going on now in our denomination is a mini-re-reformation. We're going through our own version of 1517, with one side convinced they have always had God's thinking on homosexuality figured out, and the other side wondering if we have really heard what God has to say on the subject. I encourage everyone I talk to to trust that God intends a good outcome for us all. I am trying to think that way myself. But we are feeling how we're feeling. And encouragement to "think positive" can be about as comforting in this moment as telling a sobbing 6 year-old who has just lost her pet, "Forget Fluffy. We'll get you an even better dog."

It is admittedly very hard to put aside our own ideas of how God wants things to be, and trust that God will work how God will work, and not how we think God should work. God has a plan for us, whether we understand what it is or not. And humanity does not have an especially good track record at remembering that.

God did a "new thing" in the Garden of Eden, but Adam and Eve didn't get it. They thought they'd try their hands at being God themselves. God did a "new thing" when God parted the Red Sea and delivered the Israelites from slavery. But it wasn't too many months in the desert before some of the Israelites talked of giving up, going back to Egypt, and trading in their freedom for a return to the hard life of captivity, just to make sure they got their meals on time. God did a "new thing" and cemented his covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai, but Moses had not even returned from the mountaintop with the 10 Commandments before the people were dancing around a golden calf, calling it their "god."

And God did a "new thing" coming to live among us in the person of Christ. How did we do with that one? We tried to ignore him, until we could no longer ignore him; then we tried to discredit him; and when we could no longer ignore or discredit him we betrayed him, condemned him to death, and then nailed him to a tree.

No, our record of getting our lives in sync with what God is trying to do is not good. And, unfortunately, when we fail to recognize that God's perspective is so much more vast than we can imagine, we continue to find ourselves in the midst of existences that, from our constrained points of view, seem never to be going according to plan. And we can find ourselves, like the minister in the story, desperately clutching the steeple as the water rises, insisting to ourselves that any minute now God will come around to our way of thinking.

You see, our minister friend, for all his claims to have been doing the will of God for forty years, didn't really trust God to work the way God wanted to work. He failed to give himself over to the will of God because he lacked the confidence to see that God is always trying to do a new thing in our lives, and in the world.

In today's reading from his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul is warning them about a similar kind of problem. Paul tells the people not to place their confidence in the flesh, but in the Spirit of God. When he talks of having confidence in the flesh, he is talking about trusting in ourselves, and in our ability to lead righteous lives through our own efforts, our laws, and our human institutions, rather than by believing in Christ, and following the movement of His Spirit.

Paul starts off by establishing firmly the fact that he knows what he is talking about. And he does that by revealing some things about himself, and where he has come from. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Paul was a Pharisee, a member of the most zealous group of followers of the Hebrew law. For them, religion meant an uncompromising and very public adherence to a strict code of behavior.

You hear Jesus squaring off with the Pharisees all the time in the gospels. Jesus' problem with the Pharisees was that their external observances over time had taken the place of any true spirituality. The practice of their faith had become rigid; their law had become their god. But their law also became a wall; a fortress that separated us from them, the good people from the bad, and the saved from the unsaved.

Paul tells the church at Philippi that if anyone has reason to understand what it means to be anchored in the things of the past, Paul does. He had his circumcision and presumably all the other rites of passage according to the law. Paul says he is no mere convert to the Jewish faith – he can trace his ancestry back through the tribe of Benjamin. According to the legalistic definition of righteous behavior of the Pharisees, he was a man without fault. He was a Hebrew's Hebrew. And if anyone had any doubt about his religious zeal, Paul reminds them that he had been tireless in his condemnation and persecution of the early Christian church.

But despite his Pharisaic past, Paul couldn't hide forever from the new thing that God had done in his life through Christ – the new thing God was doing in the life of the world. Paul was to become the driving force behind sharing the gospel message of salvation with those outside the Jewish community. Paul says in Philippians that all the profit in his old way of life – all the social standing, all the security of being one of the “ins”, all the sense of moral superiority – he now counts as loss. All the laws and moral codes come to nothing “... compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus is my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” (Phil. 3:8)

Paul finally saw that in Christ, God had done a new thing, reconciling us to God and to all people. Paul stepped out boldly in faith, and did a new thing himself. Paul ends today with this: “Not that I have already obtained all this... but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers [and sisters], I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead...” (Phil. 3:12-13)

These are some wonderful words – and necessary words; especially in times of upheaval and transition. We can confidently embrace the new thing God is doing, here, and now. We can do that, even though our lives will change, because of the one thing that never changes: the character of our God. God's grace and power, that have sustained us in the past, will see us through the present and guide us into the future. God gives us a promise of newness that we cannot generate on our own. The God who creates water in the desert, and makes streams in the wilderness, is doing a new thing.

May God grant us all the eyes to see it.