

"Our Hang ups."      Exodus 20:1-21; Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17; Matt. 22:34-40  
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David E. Young  
Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2008

On this Reformation Sunday we are surrounded by banners that give a symbolic reminder of the faith that has been handed down to us through centuries of struggle and sacrifice by those who knew that each generation must come to an awareness and an understanding of who Jesus Christ is for them and what it means to follow him in their day.

For us, no less than for them, this means we must immerse ourselves in Jesus' teachings to gain a clearer picture of what his words meant back then and what they mean to us now.

The people who first encountered Jesus were looking for answers to ultimate questions and so are we. We are hung up on the quest for meaning, to know that our lives matter and that we matter to God.

Our religious values and beliefs help give shape to our lives. We structure our lives around central teachings of our faith. Sometimes those central, essential, core values become obscured and our life becomes warped and misshapen because we treat as essential those things that are time bound and not essential to our faith.

The question put to Jesus: "What is the greatest commandment?" was to test him to see whether his teachings passed muster with the leading religious authorities of his day. His answer went right to the heart of the simplicity of the life of faith and its utter complexity when it comes to living out the ramifications of those simple guidelines.

"Love God and love your neighbor as yourself" he said. "On these two commandments hang all the law of God and the teachings of the prophets."

We are hung up with many things. Jesus would want us to be hung up on living out our love of God to the best of our ability and living out a love for neighbor that goes beyond all bounds and expectations. If we concentrated on these two, the chances are we would not have much time left over for the petty parochial concerns that too often take center stage.

In some respects, the process of the reformation is an ongoing attempt to bring these two commands into the forefront and to let them give shape to the life of the church.

Looking around the room, we see the banners that correspond to historic times in which people of faith felt driven to say what it means to love God and love neighbor and live as the church of Jesus Christ, witnessing to his word and work in the world.

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest and perhaps is also the one with which we are most familiar. Its banner is on the wall to my left. Its dark colors and somber tones evoke that time period in which it was not safe to be a confessing Christian. Such a public affirmation would be a death sentence in the Roman Empire.

That state of affairs was reversed by the conversion of Emperor Constantine who called for a council of church leaders to meet in the town of Niceae in 325 A.D. to come up with a universal creed for the church of his day. Their work resulted in the Nicene Creed, the banner for which is on the wall behind me. Central to the Nicene Creed is the nature of Christ and the Trinity.

The church of Jesus Christ sustained itself in the power of the Spirit, with the Bible and these two creeds - the Apostles' and the Nicene - for more than one thousand years. Even today these creeds express the faith of the universal Christian church and are central to the affirmations that Presbyterians share with Christians of every denomination and affiliation in every place worldwide.

But these two are not the only creeds, confessions or affirmations that have come to be so that the church of Jesus Christ can continue its witness to the saving love of God for us and for all.

At the time of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was necessary to draw a distinction between the doctrines and practices of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church and those who were seeking to reform it.

We use this word "reform" in different ways. When it comes to the church of the 1500's the desire was to return to the practices of the ancient church, to re-form the church in accordance with the likeness of the first century church. Abuses, additions, and changes that had gone unquestioned for many years finally came to the forefront as battle lines were drawn and the shape of Christianity was altered.

One of the reasons why we celebrate Reformation Sunday on this day is to commemorate the courage of Martin Luther who nailed his 95 Theses (talking points, if you will) to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517. Luther wanted to curb the excesses of the church and bring it more into conformity with Bible teachings, to re-form it more closely to the teachings and practices of the early church.

Luther's concerns found a hearing in the hearts of many. Fueled by the recent translations of the Bible into the languages of the people of Europe and fanned by the negative reaction of the church

establishment to Luther's ideas, the Reformation fire that Luther lit quickly spread throughout Europe.

As is often the case with reform movements, there were those who felt that Luther did not go far enough and, for the sake of obedience to Christ, pressed on and expanded the Reformation. As Presbyterian Christians we count ourselves among those people of faith.

The Scots Confession of 1560, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 and The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 are but three examples from the numerous creeds, confessions and catechisms that arose during this time of greater discernment of the call to faithfulness that the Reformers sought to answer.

The banners created to capture the essence of these Reformation statements appear in the windows on the right side of the sanctuary. Their symbols speak of the centrality of Christ, the unique witness to him in the Scriptures, the doctrine and nature of the Church, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

In England, the Scots Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism were the standards until 1647 when political and religious events in England led to the writing of the Westminster Confession and the Westminster Catechism. By 1729 these two were the standards for the Presbyterians in the American Colonies and they have remained in a central position for training and instruction in the faith ever since.

The Sovereignty of God, Salvation through Christ, and the centrality of Scripture continue to be themes that shine through the Reformation. But, more than a religious movement of a particular historical time period, the attitude of the Reformation continues to find expression in the church.

When the church of Jesus Christ was threatened by Hitler's desire to make it an arm of the Reich many German Christians resisted and met in Barmen in 1934. The Barmen Declaration speaks with power about the dangers of idolatry and the sovereignty of God. It lifts up Christ as the only savior of humanity. The Banner for Barmen is readily identified with the swastika crossed out and the cross of Christ rising out of the fires of persecution and sacrifice.

We often look to earlier centuries, such as the time of the early church when Christians were being thrown to the lions, as times of hardship and suffering for Christians. They certainly were but, even so, the 20<sup>th</sup> century stands as the most lethal century for people of faith worldwide, reminding us that the cause of Christ is still a dangerous calling whenever our dedication to God is seen as a threat to Caesar's power.

In the 1960's there were many emerging threats to stability and security. There was great social unrest, race riots, rising nuclear proliferation, a red-hot cold war, a race to the moon, Vietnam and political turmoil. With rapid change and escalating conflict both nationally and worldwide, the church sought to speak out by emphasizing the love, justice and mercy of God. The Confession of 1967 speaks a word of reconciliation and peace and draws us back to the constancy of God's faithful love as a solid foundation from which to address a rapidly changing world.

You can see the banner for this Confession hanging on the left hand side of the sanctuary. God reaches down to us with the love of Christ even as we reach across barriers of race and culture to embrace strangers as sisters and brothers in the Lord.

Just as in the Reformation era creeds and confessions were created to describe the beliefs of newly formed faith groups, the Brief

Statement of Faith came about with the reunion of the former Southern and Northern Presbyterian denominations in the United States in 1983. The Statement is structured around the three fold benediction that is often used: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The rainbow cross symbolizes how a diversity of cultures finds unity in the cross of Christ. The hands of God hold a fractured globe secure and will not let it fall. The symbol of the Presbyterian Church (USA) of which we are a part occupies the lower portion of the banner offering a rich variety of shapes and images evoking many of the central themes of our tradition.

We have circled the room, but we have not come full circle. The circle is never closed. Now is the time for us to continue the journey. We are charged with living out a living faith in today's complex environment. We have the tools we need to refashion and reshape the church more and more into the image of Christ's body. They are the same tools the church of Jesus Christ has always had: God's grace, God's gift of faith, the witness to God's work in Holy Scripture, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

Our ministry and our mission will continue to evolve. As they do, will we spend our time looking backwards, longing for a bygone era or looking backwards, learning from the past so that we can reclaim our historic hang up with Christ's call to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves? How will our love of God and our love of neighbor define us and shape us in the days to come? I am excited and anxious to find out what God has in store for us! Aren't you?

Let us pray.