

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
Reformation Sunday, Oct 29, 2017
I Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13

Reforming: Neither New nor Finished

May the words spoken, and the words, received be only in your service, Great God of Love. Amen.

Family trees are complicated. Branches head off in all directions, and family heroics and family scandals are part of every tree. This fall we've been investigating Jesus' family tree—his and our spiritual ancestors of the Hebrew Bible out of which Jesus was born, whose faith informed his faith, whose failings shaped his words of judgment.

Last week we read the story of the prophet Samuel anointing David as king over Israel because their first king, Saul, had failed to keep covenant with God. Although anointed, David didn't immediately ascend to the throne. There were all kinds of intrigue before David wrestled power away from Saul.

Today, we leap forward in the narrative to where Solomon, David's son, is king. David's reign also was not without its moments of both great faithfulness and great sin and power struggles, so it should be no surprise that Solomon's story includes the same. These ancient stories may seem unfamiliar to us, but are they really that foreign? Power carries with it the potential for corruption. We see this play out before us every day! And, as in biblical stories, when religion is used to serve the power structure and not the people of God, those deformities make God weep all the harder. The stories remind us of the need for ongoing repentance and reformation within institutions that have become deformed by the sin of dominance.

In today's scripture reading, we find a celebration of the temple that Solomon built for the Israelite's god, Yahweh, whom the Israelites celebrated for creating all that was made, blessing their ancestors, liberating them from captivity, and making a covenant with every generation. That covenant was represented by the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were etched. These tablets had been contained in a special box called the Ark of the Covenant ever since the Israelites had been a wandering people after the Exodus. In fact, the Ark of the Covenant was thought to be Yahweh's physical dwelling place. It was taken into battle, so that Yahweh could battle with the opposing armies' gods, and it was carried from place to place during the Israelites period of wandering until they finally made their home in Jerusalem.

During Solomon's reign the temple in Jerusalem was built, a permanent dwelling place of the Ark—and therefore God—and a proper place to conduct worship and sacrifices. Only the best stone and wood were used, everything carved to perfection and overlaid with gold. It was a marvel! Yahweh must have loved this sanctuary, this testament to Israel's fidelity.

But maybe not, at least not wholly. Remember, Yahweh is the same god who despised idols that distracted the people from their covenant. Yahweh railed against injustice. And Yahweh commanded that the most vulnerable in society be cared for and treated fairly. Yet, Solomon built the ostentatious temple through heavy taxation and corvee labor. Israelites were conscripted into providing unpaid labor, and non-Israelites in the region were taken into slavery to provide additional labor.

Solomon created a beautiful temple for Yahweh, but he failed to worship Yahweh alone. He began worshiping foreign gods and idols, and forgot the covenant God had made with him

and his people. Solomon's sin eventually led to his downfall and what would become a divided kingdom.

Forgetting covenant with God is the story again and again in Jesus' Jewish roots and our Christian tradition. This inevitably leads to God doing a new thing by calling us back to God through prophets and reformers. Every year around this time in the Christian church calendar, we celebrate what we call the Protestant Reformation, or simply the Reformation. It commemorates the date, 500 years ago this year, when a monk named Martin Luther nailed a document that contained 95 theses, or talking points, on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in Germany. These were concerns he had about how "the church," that is the Roman Catholic Church, had forgotten God's new covenant through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

There is evidence that Martin Luther was influenced by the Ethiopian Church in Africa. Dr. David Daniels of McCormick Seminary writes that Luther found that the Church of Ethiopia "embodied the gospel message more robustly and faithfully." They already had scripture in the vernacular and married clergy, and "they did not recognize the primacy of the Roman pope, indulgences, purgatory, or marriage as a sacrament."¹ That there are likely African roots in the Protestant Reformation is significant, since the narrative that has emerged has been that the Reformation is exclusively the product of European imagination.

While the issues of the Reformation are complex, Martin Luther was particularly angry with the Roman Catholic Church because of the Church's attempt to sell God's mercy and forgiveness. *Literally* sell it, through what were called "indulgences." For a price, one could purchase personal forgiveness and access to salvation. This made God's grace easy to obtain for the wealthy but financially oppressive or out-of-reach altogether for the peasant. Whereas Solomon used corvee labor and taxation to build his wealth and the opulent temple, Rome used the sale of indulgences. In both cases, the God of covenant had been supplanted by idols of wealth and power.

Luther hadn't intended to create a schism in the Roman Catholic Church. He believed there could be a healthy debate, and God's truth would prevail in a reform of the institution. Instead, Luther was excommunicated by the Roman Church and his life was threatened by the Roman emperor. He and other "protestors" (hence the name Protestant), therefore, created their own churches. There were several reformers, each with theological beliefs and ecclesiastic opinions, hence several denominations branched off the family tree. Like I said, family trees are complicated. If you look on the back of the coloring page in your bulletin, you'll see the way the UCC family tree developed.

One of the great gifts of Martin Luther's Reformation was the reminder that God's grace is freely available, to everyone, without mediation, through Christ. One cannot purchase it with either money or merit. Luther spoke of the principles of sola scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fides—that is "only according to the scripture, by grace, through faith" does one obtain salvation.² He was influenced by passages such as Paul's letter to the Romans which states: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:17) and the letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

¹ "Honor the Reformation's African Roots," by Dr. David D. Daniels, professor, McCormick Theological Seminary, found at <http://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2017/10/21/honor-reformations-african-roots/783252001/>

² In *Christianity: A Global History* by David Chitester, p 312-314

And yet, the reformers and the reformation they began were themselves not free from the corruption of power. In Europe, the new Protestant churches became aligned with urban centers and emerging city-states, not unlike how the Roman Catholic Church had been aligned with the Holy Roman Empire since the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century. (This is the same empire, by the way, that had crucified Jesus a few centuries before.)

Protestant Christianity therefore was still troublingly related to power that would grow as European nations developed and became empires in their own right. Christianity and imperialism, evangelism and colonization, went hand-in-hand in the project of western Christianity, including in the Americas and the inheritance in our majority white, mainline, Protestant denominations.

But 500 years out from Luther's 95 theses, a new type of Reformation is underway. For the first time in almost two millennia, the imperialistic underpinnings of Christianity are beginning to show signs of cracking. Although most in power are still required to pass an unconstitutional but nonetheless binding religious test, and Christian rhetoric has been used to justify everything from preemptive wars to why the 1% should continue to benefit from capitalism, fewer and fewer people are active in churches.

We don't know how this is going to shake out, but this is great news! Okay, I admit that when I look around and see so few faces in worship on a Sunday morning, I tend toward doubt this. But if I look beyond a fear of the institution of church as I know it transforming into something that may not be sustainable as it has been, and look into the opportunity for such a reformation, it's a good thing. A God thing. It means that we—not just Community of Hope and the MCC, but the Church universal—have a better chance at being a faith community that will live out the actual, revolutionary kind of Gospel that Jesus lived and taught and preached.

That gospel isn't the good news of dominant culture—the kind tied to the interests of the empire. Rather, it is the good news Jesus brings to the marginalized and oppressed, the sick and the grieving, the outcast and the powerless. It is the good news of God's unfailing covenant, in the flesh and for the flesh and not only the of and for the spirit.

Drew Hart, in his book *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, calls this Jesus-shaped ministry. It is faith and ministry and institution that respond in ways that Jesus responded, to whom and with whom Jesus ministered. Empire always looks from the top down, seeing things from the perspective of the powerful. Jesus looked from the bottom up, seeing things from the perspective of the weak.

The reformation that's needed in the predominantly white, mainline Protestant church now is to learn more deeply who Jesus was and yet is; how he lived and loved and served, to whom he went out and whom he called in, whom he comforted and whom he judged. We have the opportunity to learn to be disciples of the way of Jesus for the sake of love and justice instead of for the trappings of power. Oppressed communities have much to teach dominant culture communities about this kind of relationship to our faith and keeping covenant with God. The more points of privilege one has in our culture, the harder it can be to separate faith—separate our understanding of Jesus—from the power structure.

We don't know how all of this will shake out yet. We're living in the midst of a religious transition. Will we fight to hang on to the old structure, or will we embrace an unknown future by embracing the God whom we know in Jesus? Our desire for stability and the temptations of privilege can lure us to want the sure thing of the past. But to have a more authentic life in God by having a Jesus-shaped faith that leads to a Jesus-shaped ministry and a Jesus-shaped community of faith is not only that to which we as Christians are called, it is to live inside of the

kind of grace that Martin Luther so clearly perceived.
May it be so.