

RE-FORMATION SUNDAYS
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
October 31, 2010

Reading: From the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (NEB)
Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we have forgiven those who have wronged us. (6:12)
For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will never be forgiven by your Father. (6:14-15)

On this day in 1517, the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, posted his *Ninety-five Thesis on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This was the common practice in academic communities in Luther's time for debate and conversation. His purpose was not the creation of the Protestant Church. He was seeking to re-open the debate about the sale of indulgences.

The idea of indulgences can be traced back to the sixth century. The general concept is that the church could make a full or partial remittance of sin effective on behalf of the deceased. Somewhere along the line a church financial consultant figured out that money would be a perfect tool for such a transaction. Indulgences were sold benefiting the Vatican, Catholic churches and priests, as well as secular princes and potentates who required a percentage of the forgiveness business. Such corruption was used by various popes to fund military actions against bishops competing for the Holy See, the reconstruction of St. Peter's Cathedral, and other projects of personal wealth. Luther decried these abuses and his *Ninety-five Theses* and challenged the very idea that "the pope holds the keys to purgatory."

Pope Leo X issued a papal bull in 1520, entitled “Condemning the Errors of Martin Luther.” He demanded that Luther retract 41 of the 95 theses. Luther refused and Leo excommunicated him.

Luther’s reformation went even further over the decades to come. He denied that human beings required an intermediary, namely a priest, between him or her self and God. He promoted the “priesthood of all believers,” believing that Christians are given the care and mutual aid of one another. Luther translated the Vulgate Bible into German, making it available to those citizens who could read. He is most famous for his doctrine of justification by faith alone, meaning that salvation was offered by the full grace of God through Jesus Christ. Trust in that divine act was all that was required of the repentant sinner.

There were, of course, other reformers such as John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and Menno Simons. Mainstream Protestants on the paths of Luther and Calvin are often referred to as the Magisterial Reformation because secular heads of state supported them. The Radical Reformation is made up of people like Menno Simons who were not supported by the state. The followers on Menno would become Mennonites. Other radical reformers included the Amish, the Quakers, and the Unitarians.

We tend to think of the Reformation or the Reformations, as an event spanning the 16th and 17th centuries. I submit to you that the Christian church ought to be in constant reformation as its understanding of the gospel and the church emerges in the vicissitudes of time and history. This morning I would like to focus on two themes of the original Protestant Reformation for the 21st century church. I will talk about the

place of the Bible in contemporary Christianity and the church as the community of radical grace and forgiveness.

The place of the Bible in Christianity is incontestable. We may not like it, agree with it, or wonder what to do with it, but we cannot deny the place of the Bible in both our history and current life. By translating the Bible into the common vernacular the Reformation put into the hands of ordinary people one of the major sources of authority of Christianity. Luther's term, *sola scriptura*, centered the Bible as the primary source of Christian authority for all matters of faith – not the Pope. No longer relying on preaching, teaching, creed and doctrine, the laity could read the words of the Bible and determine for themselves the message of the gospel. Of course the reformers of the 16th and 17th century would read the Bible more literally than we do. The Enlightenment was still a century away and higher criticism of the Bible was two centuries away. There are still such 16th and 17th century Christians around today.

I believe that one of the greatest mistakes that progressive Christians have made is to take a benign approach to the Bible. We have learned how to read the Bible critically, found its contradictions, and been appalled by portrayals of God as a vindictive and angry fellow. Many of the cultural practices of ancient peoples mean nothing to us. Terms like “Zion,” “Pharisee,” “the Law,” and “Immanuel” have no relevance to us. We have decided to give up on it altogether. Or, we have taken it off the coffee table in the living room and slipped it quietly into the library stacks.

Given its significant place in the history of Christianity and Western society as a whole, I think we should take it seriously! I think we should read and study it carefully. Where there are issues, contradictions, or confusion sort them out. Name

them and wrestle with them. It might be the case that we determine that a book or passage of the Bible is incomprehensible, or socially irrelevant, or even a blatant contradiction of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as we understand it.

Take, for example, the book of Nahum. If you want to scare the hell out of your children this Halloween, read this book out of the Old Testament. Nahum spills more blood in his three short chapters than much of the Bible combined. He begins his book with these words:

“The Lord is a jealous god, a god of vengeance; the Lord takes vengeance and is quick to anger...Who can stand before his wrath? Who can resist his fury? His anger pours out like a stream of fire, and the rocks melt before him.” (Nahum 1: 1, 6)

The story moves on describe the bloody revenge of God against the Assyrians with images of crimson swords and ravaging lions. There is promise for the faithful remnant of Jews but the city of Nineveh is totally destroyed. A few Jews may be saved but there will be nothing left of the city to return to. The book concludes:

“Your wounds cannot be assuaged, your injury is mortal; all who have heard of your fate clap their hands in joy. Are there any whom your ceaseless cruelty has not borne down?” (3:19)

I have got to tell you that the Texas chainsaw murderer, Carrie, and Freddie Krueger have nothing on Yahweh. Even Dr. Hannibal Lecter cannot sleep at night having read the book of Nahum.

So what do Christian progressive do with this piece of scripture? For one, I would ask if this image of God is consistent with the image of God in the New Testament. How does this square with St. John’s conviction that “God is love”? Or Nahum’s proclamation contrasted with Jesus who says consistently throughout the gospels, “But you must love your enemies and do good; and lend without expecting

any return; and you will have a rich reward: you will be sons of the Most High, because he himself is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” (Luke 6:35) Clearly, we understand and then set aside the book of Nahum. But we do not forget it.

We do not forget it because there are many who believe that God is an angry god. They believe that God threatens the annihilation of sinners, enemies of our country, or people who are different. They are the kind of people who would take Nahum and use it as justification for a violent response to our supposed enemies. That is the message of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka. That is the justification of militant fundamentalists around the world.

We cannot deny that part of our history and scripture. Intellectual and historical integrity require more of us than avoidance. So let’s take something like Nahum and say, “Yes, this is part of our heritage. We have read it and thought about it. Now we reject it because it contravenes of the Way of the Cross.”

If we are going to have a place and a voice at the table of Christianity we must use the Bible as something more than a booster seat. If we remain silent we have given the Bible to its most abusive and dangerous interpreters.

The Biblical scholarship that has emerged since I went to seminary in 1970 has profoundly changed how I read and understand the Bible. My mind has changed as new research and insight have expanded and deepened. I do not think I am faithful to my responsibility as a minister to ignore the scholarship and or fail to share it with you. I also think it is incumbent upon all Christians to read and think. Luther and

others like John Wycliffe gave the Bible back to the people. It is the duty of Christians like you and me to take this book and be responsible for it.

Perhaps the most important theme of the Lutheran Reformation is justification by grace. Luther asserted that we are justified by faith in the grace of God. That is to say, we are forgiven and restored because of the love of God. Now I believe that, but I also think that Protestantism has generally concluded that nothing is really expected of us. God loves and forgives us and we cannot do better than that. All we have to do in the common parlance is “accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and personal savior.” Anything we might do is inconsequential and not worth bothering about. If we slip and sin it is OK because God will forgive us our sins. It is like the satirical quip attributed to Augustine, “I love to sin. God loves to forgive sins. It is the best of all possible worlds.”

I believe that the Christian church needs to reform its practice of grace. I believe that Jesus calls us to be communities of radical forgiveness. I mentioned the radical wing of the Reformation and the Mennonites. Listen to this reading from their Dordrecht Confession of Faith of 1632:

“As regards revenge, that is, to oppose an enemy with the sword, we believe and confess that the Lord Christ has forbidden and set aside to his disciples and followers all revenge and retaliation, and commanded them to render to no one evil for evil, or cursing for cursing, but to put the sword into the sheath, or, as the prophets have predicted, to beat the swords into ploughshares.

From this we understand that therefore, and according to his example, we must not inflict pain, harm, or sorrow upon any one, but seek the highest welfare and salvation of all men, and even, if necessity require it, flee for the Lord’s sake from one city or country into another, and suffer the spoiling of our goods; that we must not harm any one, and when we are smitten, rather turn the other cheek also, than take revenge or retaliate.

And, moreover, that we must pray for our enemies, feed and refresh them whenever they are hungry or thirsty, and thus convince them by well-doing, and overcome all ignorance.

Finally, that we must do good and commend ourselves to every man's conscience; and, according to the law of Christ, do unto no one that which we could not have done to us."

The Dordrecht Confession remains an important document in the Anabaptist tradition.

That is the faith of a congregation of radical forgiveness. "Forgiveness," wrote

Reinhold Niebuhr, "is the final form of love."

On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV entered the one room Amish schoolhouse of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He ordered the teachers and the boys to leave the building. He had bound the girls and planned to rape them. But the police responded too quickly and he shot ten of them. Five died and five were wounded before he turned his gun on himself. It was one of those events where you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news, like the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the 9/11 terrorist attack. Never shall I forget the words of the oldest girl, a 13-year-old named Marian, "Shoot me first." Perhaps she hoped that if he shot her his rage would be sated. Perhaps she wanted to show the other girls courage. For by her words and courage, even in death Charles Roberts was not in control.

The immediate response of the Amish community was the response of forgiveness. Most of us could not believe it was true or credible. We thought that deep down they really resented Charles Roberts. But all research has proven otherwise. They really did forgive Charles Roberts.

I have to confess to you that as I was thinking about this sermon in the shower on Thursday morning, all of the feelings that I had about this terrible incident welled back up within me. I felt sad and resentful. The first thoughts I had about this story

jumped out of my memory box and shouted, “For God’s sake, not the Amish children.” Then as the warm water sprayed my body I realized that I had not forgiven Charles Roberts. The Amish families have forgiven him but I had not. Of course I was not a victim and really have nothing to forgive. What I lost was a naïve illusion that the plain living of the Amish exempted them the violence of American society. My anger was at the dissolution of a romantic ideal.

The book, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* studies this story and the Amish belief about and practice of forgiveness. Listen to how the authors define forgiveness:

“Forgiveness is a particular form of grace that always involves an offense, an offender, and a victim (in this case, a victimized community.) When forgiveness happens, a victim forgoes the right of revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer. Some people who have studied forgiveness extend this definition a step further, contending that positive feelings toward an offender – feelings such as love and compassion – are also essential to forgiveness. For their part, the Amish believe that gracious actions extended to the offender are an important aspect of authentic forgiveness.”¹

And just so you know, these are not simply theoretical words. The Amish called on the Robert’s family within hours of the shooting. They attended his funeral and contributed thousands of dollars to the Roberts Family Fund.

The Amish religion and culture is deeply steeped in grace and its expression of forgiveness. It is taught, prayed for, and emphasized in a life of deep humility. On the one hand it is as simple as this: “We forgive so that God will forgive us.” Tight families and close-knit communities strengthen it. These are churches and villages

¹ Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, & David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), xiii.

that work, pray, and celebrate with one another through out the day and week. They see each other constantly. The idea that they would see each other only on Sunday morning or Wednesday night would never enter their minds. Their bishops, preachers, and deacons are thoroughly mixed into the daily round of plowing, shop keeping, manufacture of furniture, breaking bread together, and gathering every other Sunday morning in someone's home or barn for the worship service. The service is followed by a common meal. Forgiveness is woven throughout the garment of their everyday life.

In suburban and urban congregations such intimacy is seldom and rare. And yet consider this fact. Most people go to church in search of community and intimacy. Forgiveness is an intimate transaction and we seldom experience it in our lives. We might preach and teach about forgiveness. We learn that it is something found in the Sermon on the Mount. But is it something that is experienced by us? Is it a living reality in our relationships with one another in our families or this congregation?

The great Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "I can forgive, but I cannot forget," is only another way of saying, 'I will not forgive.' Forgiveness ought to be like a cancelled note -- torn in two, and burned up, so that it never can be shown against one." Can you imagine such grace?

Because our lives are more distant, even estranged from one another, the art of forgiveness is difficult for us to practice. But I believe that if there is no forgiveness our marriages will crumble, our families will implode, our churches will become houses of bitterness, and our communities will degrade into ghettos of class, color, or religion. We are called as Christians – yes, you and me – to be agents of radical grace.

Have you heard of an organization called “September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows”? Its core group is made up of 200 family members directly affected by loss on September 11. The director and steering committee members are 9/11 family members. This is the statement of mission:

“Peaceful Tomorrows is an organization founded by family members of those killed on September 11th who have united to turn our grief into action for peace. By developing and advocating nonviolent options and actions in the pursuit of justice, we hope to break the cycles of violence engendered by war and terrorism. Acknowledging our common experience with all people affected by violence throughout the world, we work to create a safer and more peaceful world for everyone.”²

That is forgiveness in word and deed.

Luther believed that we are restored to God only by the gracious love of God. I believe that the family and the church are meant to be those places where we experience God’s grace. If we cannot find forgiveness in the church, where else? If the church does not model forgiveness how shall we learn it? If the church is not the community of radical forgiveness what real value does it give to the world? Whose voice but ours will utter the sacred words, “I forgive you.”

With the world armed to the teeth; with nations enraged by the armed trespass of others; with families and clans bearing the grudge of a brother or sister killed; is more killing the answer? Will we have world peace by anthrax? Will barbed wire fences restore relationships? I dare say no. The future of all of us will be founded in communities of radical grace, in relationships shaped by forgiveness.

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² September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows,
<http://www.peacefultomorrow.org>.