

REFORMATION -- A CALL TO HUMILITY

(10/27/19)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 23:1-12
Romans 2:1-8

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”
(Matthew 23:12)

This coming Thursday, October 31 marks the anniversary of one of the incidents in the Protestant Reformation that has come to symbolize the spirit of the movement--Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg in 1517.

It is a time for us to think about the theme of reformation in relation to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, the church of Martin Luther's day, the church of our day, and also in relation to us as individuals because, as C. G. Jung reminds us, institutions are not only created by individuals, they are *made up* of individuals. *The problems with all our institutions, in the last analysis, are our own personal psychological problems.*

In one of the so-called wisdom books of the Bible, the Book of Proverbs, we find a strong emphasis on humility. The wise person is the one who takes criticism, who is open to reproof. The fool, who is haughty, cannot admit his/her faults. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul expresses the same theme: do not presume to judge others and to regard yourself as better than they are, when you are guilty of the very same sins.

The Desert Fathers, those monastics who fled to the desert to escape the creeping materialism and obsession with power that was already, in the first three centuries, poisoning the soul of the early Christian church, placed a strong emphasis on humility. A few weeks ago I related a story from this tradition concerning one of the spiritual leaders of this movement, Abba Bessarian:

A monk was brought up before the brotherhood for having committed a grievous sin, and it was decided that he would be excommunicated. As the monk left the sanctuary, his head bent in shame, the esteemed Abba Bessarian stood up, fell into step behind his fellow monk and in a clear voice announced, “I, too, am a sinner.”

This is an example of true humility. As Jesus said in relation to the woman who was about to be stoned, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” From the eighteenth century we have a Hasidic story which draws on this theme from Jewish tradition:

The Rabbi of Lelov said to his Hasidim:

“A man cannot be redeemed until he recognizes the flaws in his soul and tries to mend them. A nation cannot be redeemed until it recognizes the flaws in its soul and tries to mend them. Whoever permits no recognition of his flaws, be it man or nation, permits no redemption. We can be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.”

This is a powerful teaching for us as individuals and also for our nation, for our political leaders. If there is one trait that is surely lacking in Washington, it is humility. Without humility there is no truth. And without the humility to face the truth about ourselves, there is no redemption.

In the passage preceding this morning’s gospel lesson, as Jesus is teaching his followers about the kingdom of God, the religious authorities interrupt. They ask him under what authority he teaches. They ask him what it is like after the resurrection. They ask him if it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome. They ask him which of the 623 religious laws is the greatest.

These are perfectly good questions. However, the Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests and lawyers do not ask these questions out of a desire to learn and grow. They do not believe Jesus has anything of value to offer them, for they are set in their beliefs. They want to trap Jesus into saying something that would turn the Jewish people, the Roman authorities, or both against him. Then they can call for his crucifixion.

Jesus does not answer their questions in the form they are posed. He turns the questions back to them or he answers on a different level. His response to the religious authorities is a teaching about humility, about the importance of approaching God with an open mind and heart.

Jesus then goes on the offensive. He accuses the religious authorities of not living in accordance with their teaching. He accuses them of talking the talk but not walking the walk.

Jesus is respectful of the authority that is vested in the religious leaders. He is not trying to undermine their teaching but to reform it, to help it evolve or unfold. In response to the lawyer’s question regarding the greatest commandment, Jesus challenges him to consider the possibility that the greatest law is not the Law of Moses but the law of love.

Jesus brings three charges against the religious authorities. These accusations applied to the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. They applied to the church of Martin Luther’s day. They apply to the church and the religious leaders of our day. They apply to the political leaders of our day. And they also apply to us as individuals.

First, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of placing themselves above the law. What is binding on others is not binding on them. They see themselves as special. They regard themselves as accountable to no one.

Second, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for applying the burdensome rules of priestly purity to all people, thus making compliance unreasonable. I think what Jesus is criticizing here is a religion of perfection as opposed to a spirituality of imperfection, which I believe is more psychologically and spiritually healthy.

Jesus' third criticism is that the religious authorities exalt themselves. They sit at the head tables of banquets. They take the best seats in the synagogues, the seats reserved for people of honor. This self-promotion runs counter to Jesus' teaching regarding the kingdom of God. It runs counter not only to his teaching, but also to his example.

It is tempting for us as Protestants to see these flaws in the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman church has been scandalized the past few decades by the disclosure of how many children have been sexually abused by priests. The first defense that was mounted by the Boston diocese against these charges was that the church is not accountable to secular laws. Because priests and bishops are presumed to be above the law, the church should be allowed to deal with the matter internally, not through criminal or civil suits. This fits Jesus' first criticism of the religious authorities of his day.

With regard to the burdensome demands of priestly purity, the Roman Catholic Church is still struggling with this issue. The church requires that all priests be celibate, even though this places a great hardship on many who would like to be married, to have a family, and still serve as priests. In doing this, the hierarchy is forcing the adoption of a monastic vow by the priests and religious of all diocesan and religious orders. We do note, however, that Pope Francis and a council of bishops that are meeting this weekend are considering eliminating this requirement in certain circumstances, e.g., allowing priests in the Amazon area and other parts of the world that are underserved by priests to be married.

Jesus did not require that all of his disciples be celibate, nor, by the way, did he require that they be men. The requirement of priestly celibacy appeared relatively late in the history of the church. It was intended to prevent the property of the church from passing to the priest's

widow and children when he died. If the priest were not allowed to marry, and if he were placed under a vow of poverty, all property would be retained by the church.

In an effort to retain control of its wealth and to claim the ultimate allegiance of its clergy, the Roman church placed a terrible burden on its priests. By not allowing them to experience the sexuality that is a part of committed love, they created a system that distorts the normal developmental process. It should come as no surprise that the parts of human nature that are not integrated in a healthy way are eventually acted out in an unhealthy and harmful way.

Third, many people are put off by what they feel is the excessive pomp and circumstance in the church. The criticism that the church hoards obscene amounts of power, property, and wealth while its people starve has been leveled against the church throughout the ages, and it can be leveled against the church today. This is why Pope Francis's decision not to live in the palatial estate of the Vatican but to live in much more humble surroundings and to drive himself around in an old Peugeot has touched so many of us. We hope that by his teaching and by his example he will usher in a new era of reform to his church, and that he will be able to increase world consciousness of the crushing burdens that are carried by the poor.

Jesus calls his followers to humility. He calls each of us to humility. He calls his church to humility. Yet arrogance has historically been one of the major problems of the church, a problem or attitude from which many problems, many distortions of the Christian gospel have arisen. The criticism of the church's arrogance and pride, of its abuse of power, was one of the major themes of the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk who loved the church, simply wanted it to examine its practices in the light of the gospel. He wanted to engage his bishop in a dialogue concerning the ways he thought their church was not being true to its calling. This was what he expected to happen following his posting of the ninety-five theses on the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg.

The dialogue never happened. The church of Luther's day was arrogant. It did not feel a need to reform. It believed it should not be questioned in matters of faith or practice. Criticism, even constructive criticism, was interpreted as disloyalty, even heresy. The response to criticism was not the kind of dialogue that could produce growth, but excommunication.

Because of its arrogance, the church was blind to its sin. It needed to take the beam out of its own eye. Because it considered itself above reproach, it could not reform itself, nor could

it respond to efforts for reform from the outside. It responded to criticism defensively. Like any totalitarian regime, it sought to stifle dissent.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was an event, but the call to reform is a process. It reminds us as a church that we are in constant need of repentance and reformation. It reminds us as individuals that we are in constant need of repentance and reformation. If we, like the church, become caught up in the sins of arrogance and pride, if we have no humility within us, we will not be able reform ourselves, nor will we be able to respond to the call for reformation from outside us. We will fail to grow both personally and spiritually.

It is easy for us as Protestants to see the sin of arrogance in the Roman Catholic Church. We should remove the beam from our own eye that we might see more clearly to help remove the splinter that is in our brother's. We are in no position to throw stones. We can be just as closed to criticism, just as resistant to undertaking a fearless and searching moral inventory. We can be just as prejudiced, just as racist, misogynous, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and Islamophobic as the culture that we should be trying to reform.

As individuals, we can see this in how we bristle when someone criticizes us or speaks poorly of us. We are deeply offended. The criticism or insult sometimes becomes the wound that will never heal. Unfortunately, some people have left their church because of a thoughtless or insensitive remark that was said either to them or about them.

We are much too sensitive when it comes to receiving criticism. We have our pride. We say this as if it were something of which we should be proud: "I have my pride." But pride is based on ego. It places us in the central position when God should be in the central position. If we dissolve ego, we dissolve pride. If we dissolve pride, we take away the power of criticism to sting, whether that criticism is legitimate or unfounded. When we become humble, we open ourselves to growth.

A Buddhist teaching tells us that we should become as burnt wood. I think this means that we should seek to burn away our ego, our self-centeredness, our egocentric attitude. A person who is as burnt wood is not apt to burst into flames of anger at the way others treat him/her, at the way life treats him/her.

Jesus did not respond defensively when people criticized him, when they said mean or hurtful things to him or about him. This is because Jesus found his grounding in God, not in his

own ego. There was no egocentrism to protect and defend, for his ego had dissolved into the great unity of God.

Jesus was not impressed by titles. This annoyed the religious authorities of his day. Jesus tells his followers that they are not to use the honorific titles of teacher, rabbi, and father. They are simply to be known as disciples of the Way. The apostle Paul, in his letters to the churches he founded, refers to himself as a “servant of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Whether we are lay people or clergy, this is how we should think of ourselves: as disciples of the Way, as servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The scripture lesson that we received this morning is a call to humility. It is natural to seek power and honor. They are signs of success in our world, but they are not signs of success in God’s world. God calls us as individuals to humble service. God also calls the church to a life, to a ministry of humble service. This system of values runs counter to our secular values, to our secular way of thinking. It exalts a spiritual rather than a materialistic ideal.

This is the countercultural dimension of Jesus teaching, the call to reform first ourselves, then our church, and then our society. Jesus reminds us that without true humility there is no true greatness. Without faith, there is no true humility.

If we look at Jesus’ life as well as his teaching, we will come to realize that the place of honor is not a throne; it is a cross. It is a life of humble service. If Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, we should never be too proud to do that in many different ways for each other. As individuals and as a church, if we respond to Jesus’ call to humility, we are carrying on the true spirit of the Reformation.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
October 27, 2019*