

REFORMATION SUNDAY
JOACHIM OF FLORIS AND RE-FORMING OUR FAITH

(10/30/2022)

Scripture Lessons: John 14:15-17, 25-27; 16:5-7; 20:19-22

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7)

“We have passed through the age of God the Father, the revelation of God in Israel. We have also passed through the age of God the Son, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and the church. We are now entering into the age of God the Holy Spirit, when people will discover God within themselves, and the church will fade away.” (Joachim of Floris)

Tomorrow, October 31, marks the 502nd anniversary of one of the events that symbolize the Protestant Reformation--Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg. The Reformation is an important part of our heritage and our identity as Christians and especially our identity as Protestants. The events and issues of the Reformation can teach us something about the heart of the Christian faith and the mission of the church in our time.

The Protestant Reformation has been described as both the saddest and the greatest moment in the history of the Christian church. It was sad because the church should not have needed such a drastic reformation; it should have been able to reform itself without causing such a deep and permanent split. The Reformation was the greatest moment in the history of the Christian church because it breathed new life into a stagnant and debilitating institution. It called people back to the central meaning of the Gospel. It ushered in a rebirth of the church second only to the reformation of the Jewish faith that came through the life and teaching of Jesus.

There are several ways to understand the phenomena of the Reformation. We could look at the people who emerged as leaders: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, and John Knox. We could study the sociology of the Reformation, the religious and political climate of the times, for, as the Reformation theologian and historian Hans Hillerbrand of Duke University has remarked, "there would have been a religious upheaval in the sixteenth century even if Martin Luther had died in the cradle." I would like us to think about the Reformation this morning from a theological perspective, focusing on one of its major themes -- the Holy Spirit as the center of our faith.

I have chosen an unusual reformer to serve as the focal point of our thoughts this morning--Joachim of Floris. Joachim, an Italian theologian, was born in 1132 and he died in 1202, long before the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. He was the Abbot of Floris (or Fiore)—which I believe is essentially the city we now call Florence. He carried on the

monastic revival begun by Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century. Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, describes Joachim as “endowed with prophetic spirit,” and he places him in *Paradiso* next to the great Franciscan, Bonaventura. However, it is only within the last century that Joachim’s works have been published in English.

In 1202 Joachim published his *Treatise on the Four Gospels*. This work was eschatological, which means it had to do with the “last days.” However, it did not predict the end of the world, as eschatological theology usually does; it predicted the end of the church.

Joachim believed that history was about to enter an age of paradise. The apocalyptic expectations that were rampant around the millennium, the first thousand years after Christ, were downplayed by the church in its focus on Augustine’s belief that the thousand-year reign of Christ, which is predicted in the Book of Revelation, referred to the age of the church, not the end of time. But in many underground religious groups, the idea remained popular that, just as on the seventh day God rested from creating the world, so at the end of six thousand years of history humanity would have rest. In other words, the world would come to an end.

As you know, I am not a big fan of biblical prophecy. I think an historical application of the symbolic teachings of scripture misses the point. I believe biblical prophecy has a lot more to do with the “ages” of the human psyche and spirituality within the individual than it does dates in the Gregorian calendar. Joachim, in his literal predictions, was a champion of the apocalyptic millennialist theologians through a questionable interpretation of scripture that presumably enabled him to discover biblical allusions to his own times.

Joachim’s understanding of scripture came to him as a sudden insight one day while he was studying the Book of Revelation. “Suddenly,” he says, “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened, and the fulfillment of this book and the harmony between the Old and the New Testaments was revealed to me.” I like that expression: “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened.” The hidden truth given to him was that just as the age of Moses had been replaced by the age of Christ, so the age of Christ must give way to the age of the Holy Spirit.

In his *Treatise on the Four Gospels* Joachim made three basic points. First, the history of humanity unfolds in three stages: the first is the age of God the Father; the second is the age of God the Son; the third is the age of God the Holy Spirit. Second, the clerical or institutional church is limited to the age of God the Son. Third, according to Joachim’s calculations, the age of the church would end in the year 1260. Unfortunately, Joachim didn’t live to see that his prediction was wrong; he died in 1202.

Joachim believed that humanity has already passed through the age of God the Father. This age was marked by the revelation of God in and through the nation of Israel and the

revealing of the Law, God's moral code. What was important during this age or stage of history was the nation of Israel, a people whom God had chosen to be a "light to the nations." This age came to an end with the birth of Jesus.

The second age, the age of God the Son, was marked by the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom we believe to be the Christ. Joachim believed that this was an evolution in the revelation of God. The nation of Israel was no longer central to our understanding of God, for now we could see what God looked like in human form. The church came into being to preserve the teachings of Jesus and to proclaim his message, to witness to Jesus as the Christ. So, in this second age, the church was very important.

Joachim, mistaken as he may have been about the dates he derived from his readings of biblical prophecies, believed, based on his religious experience and his reading of scripture, that the age of God the Son was coming to an end. He predicted that when the age of God the Son came to an end, the church would no longer be important.

Based on Joachim's calculations, the age of God the Son was to end in the year 1260. This date would usher in the age of God the Holy Spirit, an age when people "would discover God within themselves" and, according to Joachim, "the church would fade away." Joachim saw the monastic orders, to which he belonged, as the true forerunners of the age of God the Holy Spirit. The clerical church, the institutional church of his day, not surprisingly, found his teaching about the church fading away quite annoying.

I admit that my choice of Joachim for the focus of our thoughts on Reformation Sunday is strange. First, he was not a Protestant Reformer. Second, I disagree with his use of scripture to predict the end of the world or the end of the church. Third, he was wrong about his date for the end of the church, just as millennialists throughout history have been proven wrong in their predictions concerning the end of the world. Fourth, I don't believe the age of God the Father, or the age of God the Son has come to an end, for many of us find the grounding of our faith in these two persons or dimensions of the Trinity. Fifth, I obviously don't believe the age of the church has come to an end, nor do I believe the time is long overdue for the church to fade away. This would be a strange message to preach only three weeks before Stewardship Sunday, when we ask you to support this church with your pledges!

I believe Joachim made an important point, not historically, but spiritually. In the scripture passages we heard this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he has to leave them, or the Holy Spirit will not come to them. He tells them that his time with them in the flesh, as Jesus of Nazareth, has to come to an end in order that they can find him, discover him, experience him in a new way, as the Holy Spirit. He tells them that this Holy Spirit will be present within them and within the church. He then tells his disciples, "It is to your

advantage that I go.” So, Jesus intended his personal revelation of God to give way to or be superseded by the revelation of God in or as the Holy Spirit.

Joachim said that when we experience God as the Holy Spirit, when we experience God within us, we will no longer need the church. As I mentioned, the church of his day found that teaching annoying. If he were not such an important figure in the monastic movement of his day, the institutional church probably would have silenced or killed him. It is believed that Joachim was an important influence on Francis of Assisi, who lived just up the road from Floris/Florence. I believe that in many of his teachings, including this one, Joachim was wrong; but what if he was right in a way he didn't quite grasp?

Let's go back for a moment to Martin Luther. Luther, who was an Augustinian monk, obviously thought the church was important. But Luther didn't believe that the church should assume the role it was playing in the religious life of the individual. The church had set itself up as the gatekeeper to Christ, and therefore also the gatekeeper to God. If there were no way to God except through Christ, and if there were no way to Christ except through the church, then you would need to be a part of the church to be saved. There could be no salvation outside the church. This is, in fact, a dogma of the Catholic church.

Martin Luther wanted to take the church out of the central spot. He believed that spot should be reserved for the Bible. He believed the Bible, not the church, should be our guide to understanding Christ and God. He also believed the Bible should be printed in a language that the common people could understand, and that everyone should be able to read the Bible on his/her own. Just as with Joachim three hundred years earlier, the church found Luther's teaching annoying. The church didn't like the idea of losing the central spot in the process of salvation, losing the power that went with being the one and only way that people could get to God.

Luther put the Bible, the testimony of the early church, in the central position. Joachim, even though he lived three hundred years earlier than Luther, took this one step further. Joachim said that the Holy Spirit, not the Bible, should be the center of our faith. The Holy Spirit gave rise to the church, and it also gave rise to scripture. The Holy Spirit not only created the church; it calls us to continually reform the church, helping it to be true to its calling, leading it back as often as it departs from the path, especially when the church becomes an end in itself. It is not only the case that the writings of scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit enables us to interpret scripture. The Holy Spirit enables the teachings of the Bible to evolve and come alive to us in our time.

Perhaps Joachim was right, even though he was wrong. Perhaps the first reformation of the spiritual church, the true church, the mystical body of Christ, was the movement from the

centrality of God the Father and the nation of Israel to the centrality of God the Son. Perhaps the second reformation was the movement from the age of God the Son as revealed through the church to the age of God the Son revealed through the Bible. Then the third reformation, Joachim's reformation, would be the movement from the church and the Bible to the Holy Spirit as central to our understanding and experience of God the Father and God the Son.

Joachim had an interesting point. He said that God's revelation has evolved or unfolded in three stages, each of which corresponds to the three people of the Trinity. It progressed from God the Father to God the Son to God the Holy Spirit. Perhaps our experience of God evolved from the experience of God as a tribal warrior God, the God of Israel, to the God of Jesus, the God revealed in the Bible and the church, and then to the God whom we find within, to God as the Holy Spirit. Where I think Joachim missed the boat was in the conclusion he drew about the church. Joachim believed that when we discover the Holy Spirit within us, when we discover our personal connection with God, that God whom we find in the depths of our being, the depths of our psyche, then we will no longer need the church, and the church will fade away.

The church does not need to fade away! However, it does need to redefine itself! It needs to stop thinking of itself as the gatekeeper to God and devote its resources to helping people develop their own personal relationship to God. The church should help us discover God and Jesus in our own life. It should help us experience the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, who can be our guide on the journey of life. In this way of thinking, inspired by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the church becomes not a gatekeeper church, a guardian of orthodoxy, but a servant church. I believe this is in keeping with the heart of Jesus' teachings, and how Jesus viewed himself—not as one to be worshipped, but as one who has come to serve.

When we think of the implication of Joachim's teachings along these lines, we can see how important the church becomes. The church becomes like a school. To be sure, we might be able to learn how to read and write, to do mathematics, to obtain an education without setting foot in a school, but it would be very unlikely. I also don't know why we would want to do it this way, why we would not want to take advantage of a school. We know that our schools serve our citizens, and therefore serve our society. The stronger our schools, the more likely we are to become an educated people and hopefully an enlightened and more compassionate people.

Joachim's way of viewing the church is a central theme of the Reformation. Protestants believe that the individual does not exist for the sake of the church; the church exists for the sake of the individual. The church is here as a tool for God to use. It is a servant church, or it should be a servant church. In our teaching, in our worship, in our fellowship, in our mission outreach, we should help people come closer to God. We should try to be the best tool that we can. To do this, the church, just like each of us as individuals, is constantly in need of reform.

On Stewardship Sunday, which we celebrate on Thanksgiving Sunday, we affirm our commitment to share our time, our talent, and our treasure in the strengthening of our church. We affirm the commitment we made when we became members of this church and which we renew on Re-Covenanting Sunday to attend worship and to take advantage of the educational resources of our church, for this is how we grow in the faith. We commit ourselves to be a part of this church community, to care for one another and reach out in love to the world through our missions. We affirm our commitment to join our hearts in the fellowship of prayer, for we know that through opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we strengthen the power of God to bring physical, emotional, and spiritual healing to ourselves, to those in need, to our nation, and to the world.

When we strengthen our church through the sharing of our gifts, we strengthen the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in our own lives, and in the world. Let's prove Joachim wrong. We don't want his prediction to become a reality. We don't want our church to fade away! We want it to become even more strong and vital! We want it to grow and evolve that it might continue to be a fitting container for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a Christian community.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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