

Reformation Sunday
Joint Service St. Paul's and Inclusive Community
November 2, 2008
Choices, Conscience and Christ
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Voltaire once observed that if we lead people to accept absurdities, sooner or later they will commit atrocities.

Absurdities come from the Latin word surdus (deaf). It means I am deaf to you and others. I stop listening. I hear only myself.

Atrocity comes from the Latin word atrocitas (fierce, cruel).

When we no longer listen to one another, we become cruel to one another.

We can only become a community of compassion if we listen to one another. Compassion comes from the Latin. It means I see your pain and it breaks my heart. It is the best sign of love we have. Your agony is my anguish.

So it is Reformation Sunday and, it so happens, we have a New Testament text, which could hardly be more appropriate.

In Matthew 23 (1-12), Jesus details what happens to religion when it drifts into absurdities and starts to become cruel.

Let us listen, hear his words. His critique is devastating. It centers on three problems. If we look at this carefully, the problems are present today among Catholics and Protestants, with the ordained and with the baptized. The critique of Jesus calls us all to reformation.

The first problem Jesus cites is that people do not practice what they preach. In a sense they do not even hear themselves. They are deaf to their own words. They speak of love. They wear phylacteries. A phylactery is a small leather box that the contemporaries of Jesus wore on their left hand and forehead. It comes from the Latin phylacterium, which means a charm or amulet that will keep you safe.

In the box, were the words from Deuteronomy: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

One would think this is a commendable practice. Unless, of course, you have no intention of practicing what it says. You put the word of God, the love of God, in a box. You cannot hear God after a while. You become deaf to God.

This leads to the second critique of religion.

You make religion hard to bear. You tie up heavy burdens, in the striking image Jesus gives, and lay them on the shoulders of others. You do not lift a finger to help them. You carefully arrange the burden so it breaks their spirit. You oppress others. You give commandments and rules that box people in. You so oppress them with fear and guilt and heavy-heartedness, that they have no sense of their worth, only of their burden. Year by year, you take more of their life from them. You have no compassion. You are deaf to them. You commit atrocities. You make them docile. To take away all their dignity, you humiliate them. Humiliate comes from the Latin word “humus,” “dirt.” You lower them to the dirt or ground while you exalt yourself with self-righteousness and authority that only God has.

This leads to the third critique. If you do not practice what you preach; if you oppress others; it is only to exalt yourself at their expense.

You make religion theatre, and you have not only the leading role but all the parts.

You start to dress ridiculously with tassels and phylacteries and whatever tells others: I am not like you.

And you sit in the best seats at every banquet and all synagogue services.

You insist on flamboyant titles: Jesus names three of these: rabbi (master), father, instructor. Later, Catholicism will give us “Your Eminence,” “Your Excellency,” “Monsignor (my lord). Such titles seek to humiliate others.

And, Jesus says, you love to be greeted in the market place. In the time of Jesus, the longer the greeting, the more prominent the person. You love those greetings, Jesus says. It takes longer to say “Your Eminence”, than to say “hello”.

Jesus tells them, us, you made a community of compassion, a show. You offer people bread and circuses when they came for life. You took God’s People and held them hostage to your vanity, your cruelty, your deafness, your agenda. You made God’s People slaves. You sat on the chair of Moses and you led them back to Egypt.

It is time for a Reformation. Give me not rabbis but prophets, not teachers but disciples, not father but all God’s children. Give me not rank and authority. Make me instead a community of pastors who shepherd one another, a congregation of ministers who minister to one another, a discipleship of equals who know that no one of us is infallible, omniscient, omnipotent. No one of us has all of Christ or all of God. It is only when we are all together, all listening, that God’s Word has a chance to get through our deafness.

We must not be a church of Catholics or Protestants, of the ordained and the baptized, of clergy and laity but a community where people come when they are wounded and suffering to find healing and wholeness.

Reformation means that we stop humiliating the People of God by making them believe they are not as they are now, just as they are, worthy of the death of Christ and the love of God. God does not delay loving us until we earn it.

Reformation means we no longer put God in a box but leave God free to become a Spirit that seeks to abide in our hearts rather than in our structures.

Reformation means that we stop making religion silly and severe, that we use religion to make Christ, Christ, the anointed one who joined our community as God's son and died without titles or flamboyance, with no phylacteries or tassels, with no privileged place or seat of honor but on a tree, far from a synagogue, outside the city.

Allowing Christ to be Christ for us is what Reformation intended. Not keeping Christ from shepherding God's People as a pastor from serving God's People as minister or servant.

Jesus wanted to be not Jesus of Nazareth but the Risen Christ for us. Not someone we greet elaborately in a market place but someone we are at home with. Not someone who would put burdens on us but someone who would bring us to dinner, to the table of life where bread and wine restore and heal us.

Jesus wanted to be Christ for us. A father who would wait for us in compassion every time we went our prodigal ways and became estranged from our very selves. Being Christ meant that Jesus was the Eternal Samaritan who healed us and lifted us out of humiliation every time we were beaten and assaulted by life.

Being Christ meant stopping those who were ready to crush us with their charges, that we were guilty of adultery, or heresy or disobedience or selfishness. After a while, the charge hardly matters. We are all guilty if someone wants to find fault and to remain blind to the goodness in us and deaf to the sighs of sadness and sorrow in our lives.

Being Christ for us meant that Jesus wanted us to feel that we were worth rescuing, even if he had to leave 99 others to find their way as he sought us out when we were lost and terrified and felt not even worth saving.

Jesus wanted this to be Christ's church – not a church of the Pope or of Luther or of Calvin but a united Church of Christ so totally inclusive that it deserved to be called catholic, so universal that only God was big enough to be its father or mother.

In today's Gospel, it is clear that Jesus wanted to be all this for us.

Reformation means liberation, love, compassion, healing. If these are not present in our communities of faith and belief, then they are not Christ's communities any more and we must seek a community where Christ can finally become Christ for us.

Reformation means we shall never give up the hope that we can find and build such communities. And when we encounter such communities, we treasure them as the pearl of great price. On the day that we give up the hope that such communities are possible, we shall lose Christ and be left with nothing more than a church of tassels and phylacteries and titles.

The Church of Christ was not meant to be such a cartoon.

Jesus did not die for that, but for us. When we realize this, we shall have started a Reformation and finally given love the best chance it ever had.