

When I walked into the Florence sanctuary last Sunday, Darrell Hill was grinning from ear-to-ear and holding up his cell phone showing a picture, this picture. From his grin, I thought it must be his and Pam's -- she's holding the baby -- first grandchild, but it -- he, his name is "Owen" -- is their second.

Ah, but how new, how newly formed, how open he is now, and might he ever be, to the formative and transformative and re-formative power of God; may he never reach the age where he closes himself to that power in the way we constantly need to ask whether we have closed ourselves to that power.

Humans can shut down to, can turn away from, the transformative and re-formative aspects of God's power; churches, made of human beings, can also shut down and turn away, and while that is not my major theme for today, this is, indeed, Reformation Sunday, one of my personal favorites, because the Reformation reminds us that even a supposedly God-fearing human institution like the Church has room for improvement -- and which of us humans is any different?

I do want to take a moment to comment not on the ills of the Roman Catholic Church on the eve of the Reformation, but simply to observe, first, that efforts at reform began long before that day 499 years ago when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, or several years later, a French lawyer named John Calvin took charge of the church in Geneva, Switzerland, and ultimately provided the framework that resulted in the Presbyterian Church and several other denominations. Those who have been to Prague have heard of the earlier martyr John Hus, one of those who for several hundred years before Luther were trying to change aspects of the Roman Catholic Church, generally dealing more with what we would call "earthly" aspects, but to some extent theological as well. Today, I just want to note what were the *theological* keystones of the Reformation, the three -- or five, I am going to give them all, "sola's," *sola* being the feminine of the Latin adjective meaning only, or, in these cases, we translate as alone:

*sola fide* -- "Faith alone," *faith* as contrasted with what is perhaps an oversimplified sense of "works";

*sola gratia* -- "Grace alone," *by grace alone*, as contrasted with by "indulgences" granted by the church to compensate for one's sins.

It's all very much the Apostle Paul in Romans, these first two "sola's"; through our faith we are saved by God's grace as grace, as an unearned gift of God. Implicit in what the Reformers were reforming against was a statement that apparently took form only in the twentieth century,

*sola scriptura* -- "Scripture alone," not the words of a pope, quite specifically, not the "traditions" or teachings of the Church;

I do not want to ignore the other two, "sola's" that some include, which are also apparently of twentieth century origin and do relate to differences in Protestant and Catholic beliefs:

*Solus Christus* -- Christ alone, or "only Christ" in the sense that there is no other mediator "between," I do not know what other word to choose, *between* us and God. Most notably, when we share the Sacraments; we do not need a priest.

*Soli Deo gloria* -- Glory to God alone, not to saints or other figures, but to God alone. Again, there seems a tinge of anti-Catholicism to this, but it is still an important idea.

Now, in our particular strain of Protestantism, and whether you are Methodists or Lutherans part of the year, I hope you will still embrace this idea, there is another motto, and I'll skip the Latin since this idea was apparently first stated thus after World War II by the German-speaking Swiss theological great, Karl Barth:

*The church reformed, always reforming . . . according to the Word of God.*

In other words, at no point can the Church of Jesus Christ assume that it can not be called upon to change; that it is somehow immune from reforming further; that it has somehow attained what it is called to be. Reformation Sunday this may be, and we may indeed celebrate that, but let us never accept the idea that the Reformation is over, that Christ's Church -- or this particular church -- can close itself to that formative and transformative and reformatory power that we want to have work in the life of little baby Owen.

But let's not stop with the church, whether large "C" or small "c," as I like to distinguish; let's look at ourselves and ask whether there might be ways in which we yet should change in response to God's formative and transformative and reformatory power -- and whether we have resisted that power to avoid further change in our lives.

Today's Gospel lesson is one of those that is perhaps overly familiar to us; we certainly cite it when we think about the fact that Jesus dined with tax collectors, with sinners. But this story stands just a few verses from another story the writer of Luke has earlier given us, and that, too, a fairly familiar story, the story of the rich young "ruler."

[read]

The writer of Luke more than the writers of the other versions of the Gospel focuses on what might be called the "social" gospel, the responsibility of Christians toward the poor, and in a certain way, one might argue that this story is a difficult fit for *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, but I would like to focus our attention on what is a profound difference between the behaviors of the young ruler and our friend Zacchaeus. The young ruler basically says, "I have led a flawless, law-abiding life"; responding to Jesus, Zacchaeus immediately sets out to undo wrongs and to live differently! Zacchaeus is open to the transformative and reformatory power of God acting through Jesus who stands and calls to him; the young ruler is too contented with who he is and what he has done to accept that call.

I suppose I want to identify with Zacchaeus because of the physical description of him as, ahem, "vertically challenged," yet I fear there is a big part of me that has the same interest in keeping things as they are in my personal life and priorities as did the young ruler, and that is not the person I want to be.

Many of you have long heard me argue that I believe the essence of the Christian life is found in one of my favorite stories in the Hebrew Bible, the story of Jacob's wrestling with God. They wrestle to a draw, so to speak, but then go their ways. I believe that such "wrestling with God" is the essence of the Christian life, constantly wrestling to try to know God and to know what God wants of me -- wants of each of us, so that we can be *always reforming*. We can never know God perfectly, so we should never stop trying.

The young ruler in essence quit; Zacchaeus did not. Luther and Calvin would have found him to be a good example for the Reformed church, I suspect.

I have to give a brief digression. Tuesday was the eighteenth anniversary of my ordination as, then, a "Minister of Word and Sacrament" in the Presbyterian Church (USA), though I had been serving as pastor of a church for the previous year. When I threw up my hands twenty-one years ago and decided to go to seminary, a Presbyterian pastor friend said to me, "I hope there is still a church left to serve." The PCUSA has done its best to inflict wounds on itself, but I hope from what I have said about the Reformation you can understand why I believe that so-called *mainline Protestantism* matters; the ideas and the faith we represent, *faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone*, I believe more closely adhere to God's will than those of non-denominational and other denominations, especially if we do believe in, *The church reformed, always reforming . . . according to the Word of God*. I believe that though it is in danger of dying, mainline Protestantism represents the best hope for those entering the world such as little Owen.

But even more important than -- well, equally important as -- the church's always reforming is that we as individual Christians are always reforming, for as we said three

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weeks ago, "God is not done," which means that God through Christ still calls us, short or tall. Will we listen? Will we be transformed and reformed as was Zacchaeus, or will we settle for who we are?

I don't know about you, but older though I might be, I rejoice that I do not believe that God is not done with me yet, and not done with change.

Amen.