

October 25, 2009

Mark 10:46-52

10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

#### Reformation Sunday Sermon by Susi Kawolics

Four years ago, I was in the new members class at Federated UCC in Chagrin Falls. As part of the class, we were touring the church, and I remember seeing red paraments on the altar in the sanctuary. I wondered why in the world the Pentecost color was up in October. Hamilton, our minister, explained that the Sunday coming up was Reformation Sunday, and that the liturgical color for that was red. I realized that I hadn't celebrated Reformation Sunday before, perhaps because I came to the UCC from the Catholic church? Now that I am the minister here, I decided I would like to commemorate this day – hence the red parament- and this lovely stole, which I've been dying to wear!

The Protestant church understands its origin to have come out of the act of Martin Luther, a German Augustinian monk, posting 95 theses on a church door in the university town of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. That's why Reformation Sunday is celebration the Sunday before the 31<sup>st</sup>. At that time, he saw this act as an invitation to debate. Luther's propositions challenged portions of Roman Catholic doctrine and specific practices. Because of other concurrent historical events such as advances in science, inventions of various machines, more commerce and economic opportunities, people at that time were coming out of the dark ages into what was known as the Renaissance. There had also been a growing rumble of discontent with the corruption of the church. The kindling had been gathered, and Luther's theses were really the spark that began the fire. He knew that by posting the theses on October 31st, they would be read by lots of people. The next day, All Saints Day, Wittenberg was crowded with peasants and pilgrims who had come to the city. Word of Luther's Theses spread throughout the crowd and many people called for its translation from Latin into German. A student translated the document and sent it to the

university press and from there it spread throughout Germany. It was the printing press itself, invented shortly before that, that allowed Luther's message to spread so rapidly.

Martin Luther posted these propositions to open the eyes of those in the church to its abuses. In today's gospel story, Jesus asks the blind beggar "What do you want me to do for you?" This seems rather odd, since Jesus obviously knew the beggar was blind, and so we assume he knew that the blind man wanted to be healed of that affliction. But the truth is, sometimes we do not want to be healed of our blindness, do we? Such was the case of the 16th century church. It is easy to want to remain blinded to the truth when things are going well for you. The pope and bishops and priests in the Catholic church of that time were benefiting financially from the selling of indulgences. The rich could buy their way to salvation. By keeping people ignorant and setting themselves up as the authorities, the clerics and the wealthy had power and control. Martin Luther became a threat when he addressed a number of objectionable teachings and doctrines, including salvation by works and the practice of selling indulgences. These were actual certificates that people could purchase from the Church that absolved them of their sins and promised their salvation and eternal life. Pope Leo X called for the sale of indulgences in Germany to help raise money to complete the construction of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Now there's an idea for a Fundraiser! The Pope said that those who purchased these indulgences would be absolved of all sin. Some of Luther's parishioners purchased these and asked Luther about their validity. This is what led directly to his posting of the 95 Theses. Luther argued that salvation was an act of God, given by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. God has already provided for our salvation by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and salvation is ours to accept through faith, not to buy or achieve through works.

What Luther meant as reform actually resulted in a schism between Catholics and Protestants that still exists today. There was definitely a need for reform – today even Catholics will admit that. So it may seem paradoxical to celebrate the Reformation, the splitting of the church, in light of the lectionary readings this morning. Our Psalm speaks of joyful homecoming: Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. A vision of homecoming, of gathering together those who are scattered, wends its way through these verses. The beautiful prophecy from Jeremiah also imagines a world where all come together – "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here." We visualize a throng of people: the strong, the weak, children and adults, all coming together to one place. Our gospel reading tells of the healing of a blind man – a man sitting

by the side of the road. He has been ignored, as he shouts out the passers-by tell him to be quiet. His voice is not welcome in the crowd – he is excluded. Yet Jesus hears him. When Jesus calls him, he springs up – leaving his cloak behind. Again, we see exuberance, joy in his actions. It is a joy sprung from the invitation to come to Jesus. After his healing, he joins a community coming together in response to the call of God. These stories seem to directly contradict what happened in the Reformation.

I have grown and changed in my understanding of this event. I grew up Methodist, so the story of the Reformation was part of my Sunday School education. For me, this historic event was to be celebrated. When I was young, as far as I was concerned, the Catholic church was wrong, and thank goodness Martin Luther did something about it so I could be part of a church that got it right.

Then, after I was married and moved to Bainbridge, I began attending a Catholic church and actually converted to Catholicism. I was able to see the Catholic church from the inside, to see its gifts. And now, here I am, four years into my membership in the UCC community. These experiences make me see the Reformation differently today than I did growing up. I see it not as a movement that has led to a division of Christians, but actually as one that allows us to be more united.

I understand the Reformation as a movement which has resulted in giving Christians an opportunity to worship in a way they can best worship.

For some people the best way to deepen their relationship with God is through the rituals and the practices of the Catholic Church. This is not the wrong way, it is merely a different way. And for some it is through the Protestant church. Even the various denominations provide different worship experiences. So for me the bottom line is that if these are ways to nurture people's faith, and people have a choice, then it strengthens the Christian community rather than dividing it.

Despite our divisions, we still see glimpses of the coming together prophesied by Jeremiah and proclaimed in our Psalm. The last fifty years or so have moved us along in the area of Christian Unity. Before that, Protestants and Catholics working together was almost unheard of. Now we see basic practices and rituals that take place at all Christian churches, no matter the denomination. We sing many of the same hymns. The Catholic Lectionary and the Common lectionary used by many Protestant churches often invite us to proclaim and reflect on the same passages on Sunday mornings. We see this working together on a global level as well, where leaders of the various denominations get together to pray and reflect and draft documents stating the common beliefs. But perhaps it is the praying of the Lord's prayer where we see the most concrete sign of Christian unity. We are all pray "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done."

This coming of the kingdom, the dominion of God, is the ultimate purpose for which we gather in Christ's name no matter in what

denomination we choose. Over and over the prophets and poets of the Hebrew Scriptures envisioned this realm. In the gospels, Jesus revealed the Kingdom and proclaimed its coming. And although there are glimpses of the realization of this Realm in our world, we know that there is still work to do. As long as we remain blind to those who stand on the margins and cry for mercy, there is still work to do. As long as we are blind to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the poor, there is still work to do. May we be open to those who make us see where there is still work to do, where we still need reformation.

But at the same time, may God give us the vision to see glimpses of the Kingdom already in our midst. When members of different denominations come together to charitably contribute to needs of the poor or to advocate for peace and justice, we are working towards making the images in Psalms and Jeremiah a reality. When we see beyond the divisions in the Christian church and realize the unity that exists, we experience a glimpse of God's realm. The family of God is bigger than our denominational barriers. We are part of the Christian community that is called to proclaim God's love in Christ, called to bring God's mercy to all, called to create a community where all are welcome and none are left behind. May we open our eyes to this vision, which is God's vision, and may it become the vision which we work toward. Amen.