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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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“Grace and Dynamism”
Romans 3:21-26

Reformation Sunday was officially marked on the Presbyterian calendar last Sunday. It commemorates Martin Luther’s nailing 95 Theses onto the door of the Roman Catholic Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. The theses were his objections to church theology and practices of the day.

Luther was a monk in the church and merely wanted to change the church from within. The church asked him to recant, in other words, to remove his challenges. He famously said, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” The church would have none of that so they excommunicated him.

The dismissal from the church was Luther’s rally cry to reform the church from without. Thus began the Protestant Reformation. Every Protestant church emerged from this seminal event.

Today, I shall speak about two important aspects of the Reformation. The first comes from Luther and the second from the Presbyterian Reformed tradition as expressed in our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). They are “grace” and “dynamism.”

Grace:

Over 30 years ago, when I was at seminary I watched a movie about Martin Luther. It was in black and white and in a film noir style. The music and acting were dramatic.

A few scenes stayed with me. The first portrays a Roman Catholic fund-raiser of the day, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, selling indulgences to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. An indulgence was a guarantee to the givers that when they contributed their salvation was ensured forever and when their coins touched the bottom of his moneybox, the souls of their dearly departed would fly to heaven.

Shortly thereafter, Martin Luther is walking down a street in Wittenberg in his monk’s cowl and he encounters a drunk in the gutter gleefully celebrating. The man greets a perturbed looking Luther who tells him to shape up or risk his salvation. Waving a slip of paper, he tells Luther not to worry because here in

his hand is his guarantee to enter heaven. He says he bought it from Tetzal. Luther is shocked.

In the next scene, Luther is reading his Bible. He stops at the text just read by Ed, Roman 3:21-26. It bears repeating. Paul, the writer of the biblical letter, has just expounded on Old Testament law. He now writes,

"But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now *justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.*"

This passage hits Luther between the eyes. One is saved by God's grace through faith. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. We cannot buy it as proclaimed by Tetzal. Salvation is a free gift from God. Luther's rediscovery of "Christ and his salvation" became his challenge to the Roman Catholic Church and the foundation for the Reformation.

I tell the story to share how a baby's baptism is one of the most significant signs of God's grace. A baby cannot earn God's grace. Baptism becomes God's gift of grace to the child. They become baptized members of the church by grace. Their parents affirm the faith on the baby's behalf. Later, the baby will be old enough to "confirm" the faith his or her parents made at their baptism.

Olivia is not a baby but became a member of the church through baptism today. She received God's free gift of grace. As a young teenager, she will attend confirmation, and affirm the faith for herself. Thereafter, she will be an active member like most of us here today. See what love God has given us that we are called children of God, and so we are!

I shall now turn to dynamism, the second important reformation dimension addressed today.

As the cover of the bulletin states, we are, "The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God in the power of the Spirit." So states the constitution of our denomination.

We are not stuck. We are a dynamic, evolving church. I have told members of new member classes that if this statement were not an aspect of the church I would not be a Presbyterian. As Presbyterians, we are always open to change in the light of new events and thinking in society. Sound knowledge in society reveal to us new discoveries in science and technology and we are open to our own reformation in the light of these events while at the same time offering God's word of light and love to these things.

This is an important dimension of faith because many people have left the church because they feel the church has not kept up with the issues they deal with in everyday life. In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg claims as his passion to communicate a way of seeing to those for whom an earlier understanding of Christianity makes little or no sense.

Some have left the church; becoming what Episcopal bishop Shelby Spong aptly calls the “church alumni/ae association.” Others remain in the church but struggle with the beliefs they learned in childhood – they think either they should believe them, or they reject them without having anything to put in their place. And some, especially many under 40, have never been very involved in the church and find little in Christianity that attracts them, but often are hungry for a source of meaning and values.

Borg writes, “For the past few centuries, this earlier way of seeing Christianity, [is] what I call an “earlier paradigm.” [It]...views the Bible as the unique revelation of God, emphasizes its literal meaning, and sees the Christian life as centered in believing now for the sake of salvation later – believing in God, the Bible, and Jesus as the way to heaven. Typically, it has also seen Christianity as the *only* true religion.”

This way rejected the ordination of women and gays and full inclusion of women and gays in other spheres of life. I mention ordination to tell the story of our friend Linda, a lesbian Christian who lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and a member of the church I served as an associate pastor.

Linda was joyfully and intelligently committed to her faith in Christ and felt a deep calling into ministry but the Presbyterian Church denied ordination for gays. Linda waited 20 years for the church to change and could no longer wait and so became a pastor in the United Church of Christ and has now faithfully served a church in Jacksonville for over 10 years.

After years of listening to biology, witnessing the integrity and faith of gays and through diligent biblical study and interpretation, the majority in our denomination voted last year in favor of gay ordination. It is now in our constitution.

When churches take such steps it validates the lives of many and emboldens members of society to be more open to their true selves. Thus, this week, Apple CEO, Tim Cook, who came out as gay says, “While I have never denied my sexuality, I haven’t publicly acknowledged it either, until now. So let me clear: I’m proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me.” He goes on to explain the gift in his open statement printed last Friday in the San Francisco Chronicle.

For Borg, the “second way of seeing Christianity, the “emerging paradigm,” has been developing for over a hundred years and has recently become a major grass-roots movement within mainline denominations. This is the church reformed, always to be reformed.

Positively, it is the product of Christianity’s encounter with the modern and postmodern world, including science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity. Less positively, it is the product of our awareness of how Christianity has contributed to racism, sexism, nationalism, exclusivism, and other harmful ideologies.

In the New Year, I shall facilitate a class on Borg’s book the second Sunday of each month after the worship service.

I love being a Presbyterian because we are open to change. It is in our religious genes. We “hear the voices of peoples long silenced” as the Brief Statement of Faith, our latest confession states. We simply cannot be Presbyterians and Protestants for that matter, if we were not the church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God in the power of the Spirit.

There is more to unpack here, but I will leave it there for now. Amen.