

Will We Participate in Reformation?

Will we participate in reformation (that is, re-formation)? This sacred day on the calendar of many Protestant Christians worldwide comes tomorrow as Reformation Day. This was a big day in my childhood, growing up in Lutheran day school and church. Martin Luther, a key figure in the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, was a priest and scholar who translated the Bible from Latin to German to make it more accessible to his community members – first the New Testament and then the Older Testament. Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517.

As a Lutheran grade school student, each year we read a booklet about Martin Luther, learned to understand all the moves he made in his life, and then were quizzed the next day on the content of that learning about this key leader. These theses were bold statements, asking his fellow leaders (the priests with power in the system) to consider changing some of their less savory and definitely spiritually oppressive practices. Luther spoke boldly, spoke prophetically true things to people who were in power. One of the key aspects of these many theses was the fact that those in power were trying to sell forgiveness and offer certificate of personal, spiritual forgiveness in return for donations to the religious system.

Luther certainly invites us to follow his example into bold reform. And he was excommunicated (stripped of his power within the system) for having resisted these practices by those more powerful than he. He was also declared an enemy of the state. And it is important – very important – to note that, like many heroes, Martin Luther was deeply flawed and we must care enough to notice our flaws as well.

Martin Luther carries a huge amount of responsibility for supersessionism within Christianity. That is the idea of replacement theology or fulfillment theology whereby our Christian ideas and our following of Jesus renders Judaism obsolete and even absolutely wrong.

That supersessionist streak within our Christian tradition is strong in many pockets and we need to recognize that. I wonder, did anyone speak prophetically to Martin Luther during his lifetime and name those flaws so that he could see them clearly?

The “Serenity Prayer” is something that often keeps me teachable in ways of humility and in the ways of courage. Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr is one of our ancestors in faith from the Evangelical and Reformed part of the United Church of Christ (which brought many Congregationalists and the Evangelical and Reformed Church together in the 1950s). Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that Serenity Prayer and now it is echoed by many in solidarity with one another on a weekly basis in twelve-step programs. I invite you to join your hearts with mine in prayer. God of all, as you welcome us today to consider where we might need to reform in our own lives, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow travelers on this road of life, we will invite the scriptures to inform us today. And I want to begin by sharing a glimmering moment in which a quote truly resonated with me. I imagine that happens for you from time to time as well. I will scramble to record it either on a device or on a dog-eared page of my desktop calendar. Here are words from James Baldwin, 20th-century African American novelist, playwright, and activist. Baldwin once stated, *“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”* Again, Baldwin wrote, *“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”* It is so vital that we summon courage to directly face the wrong in our lives. It’s the first step toward making change so that positive change can continue to unfold. And courage of that type requires humility. I think of humility as honest vulnerability undergirded by faith that allows us to be open to our faults being exposed and then trusting in grace so that something better (something more loving & just) can become possible.

Trying to hold a posture of courageous vulnerability and humility, let's hear an excerpt again from Isaiah:

“These interminable sacrifices of yours: what are they to me?” says God. “I am fed up with burnt offerings... their incense fills me with loathing. New moons, Sabbaths, assemblies—I cannot endure another festival of injustice!... You may heap prayer upon prayer, but I won't hear them—your hands are covered with blood! Wash! Clean yourselves! Get your injustice out of my sight! Cease to do evil and learn to do good! Search for justice and help the oppressed!”

Today is a day we are invited to wonder about re-formation within our individual lives and in our collective way of life. And it requires openness to hearing how another experiences our behavior. It's important to realize about these words from the prophet Isaiah that these pointed, even abrasive truth-telling words were by God (the loving energy that assures us we can do better even as it reminds us to notice where we are losing our way.

Supersessionism is different. Sometimes, when strong convictions turn into insularity and closed doors, we are too harsh toward another from the point of conviction around what we are experiencing. So here is an important invitation during this midterm election season: **I wonder, when have you felt so passionate about your own experiences and convictions that you have considered someone who thinks differently than you as inferior and so spoke at or about them in ways that attacked their dignity, leaving little to no space for compassion?** It is so important to keep hold of compassion when speaking truth for justice.

Let us hear again a bit from the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus and their encounter together:

“When Jesus came to the spot, he looked up and said, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry up and come on down. I'm going to stay at your house today.’ Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and welcomed Jesus with delight.

When everyone saw this, they began to grumble, 'Jesus has gone to a sinner's house as a guest.'

Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to Jesus, 'Here and now I give half my belongings to poor people. If I've defrauded anyone in the least, I'll pay them back fourfold.'

Jesus said to the tax collector, 'Today salvation has come to this house...''

I don't know about each of you, but I haven't typically identified much with this story of a short, rich man who knows exactly why he's hated by most of his community, climbs up a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus, has a direct interaction with Jesus, decides to change his corrupt behavior completely, and publicly declares that he will make reparations to anyone he has hurt.

Many of us might not gravitate toward the story of Zacchaeus because his circumstances may seem extreme and unlike our own. Yet, on the other hand, I wonder if we might also resist Zacchaeus' story because, in a deep place of knowing, we recognize in it an experience of liberation we long for ourselves but believe to be out of our spiritual reach.

So today, let us leave wondering if the liberating power in the way Jesus moved in the world and related with others can have a Zacchaeus effect on each of us today. Where in your life do you feel a call to let all-powerful Love in to reform you? Will you let yourself be like clay in the hands of Love? May we let repentance (that is, pausing, recognizing, and daring to make a turn) – may we let repentance be a precursor to salvation breaking into our lives as it did for Zacchaeus, leading to developing deeper faith in ourselves as God's agents in the world. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Isaiah 1: 10-18, Luke 19: 1-10