

21st Sunday after Pentecost– Reformation Sunday – **October 25, 2009**

Psalm 46: 1-3, 10-11; **Hebrews 13: 5b-8**; Mark 10:46-52

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, *"I will never leave you or forsake you."*

So we can say with confidence, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"*

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

THERE IS HOPE IN REFORMATION

Friends of ours went to Germany this summer to visit with family. During their month long stay, they were also invited to spend a few days in Scotland – at a castle – to celebrate a wedding. They did some sight seeing in the area and went to John Knox house – even though he's an Anglican and she's a Lutheran! My friends brought me two tokens from that visit – a key fob depicting John Knox in a stained glass window – and a paper house icon for me to build. Steve actually put it together. I wonder how Knox would have felt about such commemorations of his person and his life. My sense is that he would not have approved. Actually, my take on John Knox is that he didn't approve of much! However, he is an important figure in the history of the Presbyterian Church and the person for whom our humble church is named.

Knox was something of a radical in his time. What rulers feared were Knox's ideas more than Knox himself. He was a ruthless and successful revolutionary – changing the face of religion in his home of Scotland and having a great impact on the English Puritans. Despite his intolerance and dogmatism, Knox contributed to the struggle for human freedom as he taught that people had a duty to fight against governments in order to bring about change.

Knox built on the work and teaching of John Calvin in Geneva to develop Presbyterian polity. In that regard, Knox is considered the founder of our Presbyterian denomination whose members number millions worldwide.

Knox is in the company of many great leaders who began the Protestant Reformation in the 15th and 16th centuries – a reformation that continues to this day. We can be thankful for the Reformation we celebrate today. The reforms of the past and of the present are not universally good of course – much fragmentation and institutionalization of the gospel is a result of the reformation movement. Yet, even as we are aware of our own faults and failures – our own slow progress as believers – of how far short of the gospel ideal we fall – we can recall with hope an important dictum that emerged among Reformed communities:

ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda, "the church reformed, but always needing to be reformed."

Remembering the Reformation of the past is not intended to set it in stone – to make a paper model of it like my model of John Knox' house. We remember people like Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox, among others, in part because of their conviction. They were able to read the words recorded in Hebrews as their own, saying with confidence: *The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?*

Today we "remember our leaders, those who spoke the word of God." We "consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

Martin Luther ignited the flame that was to become the Protestant Reformation when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of a church in Germany. It was the equivalent of a face book post or newspaper ad or TV commercial today – very public – very risky. He challenged the church and authority of the day, questioning their teaching and their practice.

He was told to recant – to back down from the position he had taken. This is part of his response: *My conscience is captive to the word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.* [Martin Luther]

Luther argued that salvation could not be obtained by purchasing indulgences, through works of charity, by making a pilgrimage, or by performing other acts of piety and devotion. He 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 achieve through works. He also affirmed the priesthood of all believers – that Christians do not need an intermediary between them and God. It is the right and duty of every Christians to enter into a personal relationship with God – to read the Bible and worship in their own language – to pray directly to God rather than through another's efforts.

John Calvin continued in this vein introducing new forms of church government and liturgy, despite the opposition of several powerful families in the city who tried to curb his authority.

Calvin was a tireless polemic and apologetic writer who generated much controversy. In addition to the *Institutes*, he wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible as well as theological treatises and confessional documents, and he regularly gave sermons throughout the week in Geneva.

Calvin's writing and preaching provided the seeds for others such as John Knox. His thought exerted considerable influence and some argue that his ideas have contributed to the rise of capitalism, individualism, and representative democracy.

Today we commemorate history, a story about people that lived many years ago – people who were compelled to live out their faith confidently believing that God would help them so they need not live in fear despite the threats against them. They believed that no matter

what happened, they had to speak the truth about Jesus – and that truth changed the church.

As we follow Jesus' life and teaching we too are constantly changing, renewing, and rethinking our faith. Like the early Reformers we call for dialog and discussion – we ask questions and seek answers from God through prayer and scripture – we listen to the living Word of God, taking seriously the direction God provides. By our faith and our action, we continue to change the world.

Reformation is part of what Jesus wants us to do. When we see that is wrong in our church – in our community – in our world today we too must be compelled to live out our faith confidently believing that God is our helper. *What can anyone do to us?*

In Malawi, I saw a great deal of what is wrong in our world today. You have all heard the statistics – that the HIV/AIDS rate in the country is 14% – that 60% of those infected are women. It is quite another thing to visit with a young woman dying of AIDS. You likely know that there are a million orphans under 15 in a population of 15 million. But to visit three little boys with no clothes and no chance to go to school is to see the wrong in the world, in a community, even in the church with your heart rather than your head.

We met sick people – dying people – impoverished orphans. We heard their stories and we wondered how it could be so in a world where we 'have it all'. In Malawi today the young and the old survive, at least for a time, while the middle generation is being wiped out. What do you do when your parents, your teachers, your nurses, your doctors, die? How can a society keep going?

We were overwhelmed by the pain of what we saw and heard. What does the gospel tell us to do in the face of such injustice of our world? How do we as reformers react in a world where a young woman remains in agony because there is no money for her medication? Where a man lies dying of AIDS and there is no way to get him to the clinic? Where 16 year olds look like 10 year olds because of malnutrition? Where orphans surround you everywhere and each day mothers and fathers die and die and die and one of the biggest industries in the country is coffin making?

Our Presbyterian World Service and Development is a wonderful example of a low overhead organization that listens to the grassroots, implements through local partners and achieves significant results.¹ With our mission partners in Malawi our churches are supporting many programs through **PWS&D** and **Presbyterians Sharing** including, centers for orphans and vulnerable children, livelihood initiatives that benefit whole villages, AIDS education, healthcare opportunities, schools and a centre for the disabled. Remember there are no social services, no pensions for the old, no social safety nets to fall back upon in Malawi. These projects provide hope to those with very little in their lives. And they depend on us. Your donations have made a difference and they will continue to do so. Maybe we are continuing to change the world – slowly.

There is hope. In a land blighted by hunger, disease and poverty, we found hope in what the church is doing. We found hope in the generosity and grace of the people. That hope is

¹ Glenn Inglis, Director of the Blantyre Synod Development Commission and a PCC Missionary in Malawi.

in us because of the gospel and we can see it being lived not only among the Reformers of the past but those who live and work among us today.

While in Malawi, we met Silas Ncozana. Silas is a Malawian minister who has studied internationally and now teaches at the theological college in Zomba. He ministers in three churches and a retreat centre, runs programs for street children in his town and much more.

In 1992, Silas Ncozana was General Secretary of Blantyre Synod. Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's dictator for life, had been in control for 30 years. Human rights abuses were festering – people disappeared in the night, were detained without trial, thrown to the crocodiles, tortured, killed. Seven Catholic bishops signed a letter to be read in churches, protesting the abuses. The Malawi Congress Party met in secret and decided these seven bishops must be killed. Silas found out and he and others decided they must go and personally confront Banda.

In Silas' words: *'It was not an easy task at all. It was life or death.'* They warned their families they might not return. They went to see Banda. They told the dictator that if he killed the Catholic bishops, he must kill them too. (You might find this hard to believe but Banda was a Presbyterian elder.)

When the Muslim leader heard what Silas had done, he got in touch and said, *'we will work with you too.'* Thus, the movement for political reform took off. By 1993, Banda was forced to hold a referendum. Probably to his dismay, the people voted for multi-party democracy.

This is a remarkable story of faith and courage. It is rare for an African country to become a democracy without bloodshed. It happened in Malawi. It happened in our lifetime. And it happened, in large part, because Silas and others like him believe these words from Hebrews: *The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?*

The reformation of the past and the ongoing reformation of our lives is the continuing struggle for human freedom as expressed in the gospel. Our faith compels us, as it did our leaders in the past, to fight against that which oppresses to bring about change. Silas acted decisively in the history of Malawi and he continues to make a difference many ways today. In the time since we returned from Malawi he emailed one of our group, mentioning that he had been able to buy bread for thirteen street kids one day – likely their only food of the day.

The work of change – genuine reformation, whether of the institutional church as a whole – of an individual life – of the communities in which we live is never finished. Nor is the Holy Spirit, who fulfills that hope, ever deaf to the prayers of those who long for it. **Amen.**