

Sermon for 30 October 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost/Reformation Sunday

Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalter (*Insert: Alternate leader and people*) Psalm 119:137-194; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

“Reforming”

On this Sunday, we commemorate a day which is not even recognized by the larger part of Christianity, at least not liturgically. Even though there are millions who do, the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox churches do not, commemorate Reformation Sunday.

In all my years preaching, that’s the first time I’ve said that!

It just seemed apt this year, when we’re facing so much change, to talk to ourselves and the Lord against that background.

It’s also right to remind each other that more Protestants, along with a lot of Roman Catholics, are reading at least some of the same biblical texts every Sunday than ever before in history.

This “Common Lectionary,” as we call it, started with the Second Vatican Council, in 1962, just as I was graduating from seminary ... and has produced a great source of ground for working towards similar goals worldwide .

I ask you to keep that in mind as we focus on Habakkuk, who cries out to God about all the trouble he sees, saying such things as, “The wicked surround the righteous...” and then hears, “Write the vision...If it seems to tarry, wait for it ... the righteous live by their faith.”

Then listen to the people sing or chant from the longest psalm in scripture: “Trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight.”

Then let one of the earliest texts in the Christian church admit that sometimes folks cause so much trouble that the Lord Not church members, but God ... has to straighten them out... that’s what those verses 5-10 that are left out of the reading from 2 Thessalonians say.

And finally, listen to Luke’s story of the chief tax collector ... rich from working for the Romans against the Jews ... Zaccheus... How he gets turned around by the love of Jesus, and as Luke has Jesus tell the people who criticize him for dining with him, “.. the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Reforming. Re-forming. That’s been my experience as a preacher, year after year. I’ve not been able to see it, until years afterwards, often enough. I’ve certainly not produced it, or even been at the center of it, much of the time; but it’s getting more apparent, more real, all the time, to me personally; and I see it here, in this fellowship, as we travel the miles together, cycle after cycle.

I was telling my oldest son about some of our budget issues last Sunday night, and he reminded me that we were in trouble about apportionments when I first came. I'd forgotten ... that then somehow we listened to Betty Stadler when she volunteered to be Church Treasurer one more time, and somehow things straightened out. Then I recalled how Donna Denton helped us get a website when that was just coming into importance among all the churches... and we have lots of photographs and evidence of that ... and then that fell by the wayside, and now once again we've got that going, so anyone who uses a computer can worship with us and learn about churchwide concerns and justice issues just by clicking "bethmethumc.org." And now just this year, after waking up and realizing we've gotten months behind on our apportionments, the District Superintendent has talked with the Conference Chancellor and found that, if we agree to it, we can free up some of our assets to pay up until we raise funds to catch up... and the main thing is, as usual, not to fail to keep ourselves informed, or miss the obligations that give us self-respect as a faithful fellowship...

And so I ask us, will you consent to keep on re-forming, allowing the Lord to serve through one another together? Will you do the No, that's starting at the wrong end.

Lord, will you please encourage us? Like most folks these days, we're burdened with the bad news that gets so much space and makes such noise. We can't help being scared with our politics. We know ... it says so in the Bible ... that the people you work with are mostly small groups. They may add up, and seem big from a distance ... but in your view, they're mostly families and individuals and couples and just a few friends coming together in your grace and your surprising turns of the path, and here we are. Forgive us ...give us insight, wisdom, to rest in peace at least some of each 24 hours we live, and more time to think twice about real charity at least hourly. This is a lovely time, these are precious ties we have here with each other and with you. Jesus, come to our house. We are not lost here. We are found. Amen.