

Always Being Reformed

Today appears on church calendars, at least on a particular subset of church calendars with a special designation: Reformation Sunday. The Presbyterian Church is one of a group of Christian denominations which took form in the 16th century as part of the change brought about through the invention of the printing press. That development led to the printing of the Bible so that copies were more easily available—which led to efforts to translate the texts into the numerous languages of those who were Christian. When folks began reading the texts in their own language, they also began challenging what they were being told by the priests about the content and subsequently the rules and regulations being taught. Martin Luther is the most well-known of the early protestors against Catholic hierarchy and teachings because of the 95 thesis he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church. There were many others who found reasons to challenge the stance of the church in Rome; including John Calvin who is considered the primary founder of the branch of the movement which includes the Presbyterian Church. The movement is known as the Protestant Reformation in history books because of the two main facets which propelled it: the protest against the then current teachings in Rome and the fact these protestors did not want to create a new church but reform the one in which most of them had trained positions. Today, those of us who belong to that branch which came from Calvin's writings say that we are Reformed Christians; that our understanding of God is found in Reformed Theology. Like everything else in society this tradition adopted a slogan or motto: Reformed and always reforming. It is a catching slogan...short and easy to remember. But there is an issue with it...and that issue has to do with a basic tenet of Reformed Theology about God's sovereignty and human nature. To show a better understanding of what Reformed Theology teaches us about God's sovereignty a better statement would be Reformed and always being reformed. The texts from the Hebrew Scriptures we have record the many prophets God sent to those people who had pledged to live in a certain way as a sign of their covenant relationship with God who claimed them, who gave them guidance for forming a community where life could be lived abundantly. This morning's text comes from the prophet known as Isaiah of Jerusalem. It speaks of God's displeasure with the way those people were living. Although they evidently were following the rituals and making the sacrifices listed in the Torah, the worship was not evident in their society in the daily practices of their lives. In God's eyes thee "multitude of sacrifice and burnt offerings of rams and the blood of bulls, lambs and goats" does not make up for the injustice being done among the people. The 8th century prophets consistently called out ways the poor were subjected to practices that made their lives full of suffering; judges were corrupt, scales were not fair...the central tenets of the community God want to be formed were lacking. The prophets' message from God was "wash yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Essentially God through the prophets was asking for them to reform the way they interacted with others so that all could life well. The promise within the message for them is that if they do reform their ways, even as bad as they have been, God will claim them saying "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If they change their past sins will not be held against them but as their history reveals, they did not reform. As we follow this narrative of God with us, we come to the event

which changes the dynamic and the world. As a later prophet writing in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem says: "in the fullness of time" God intervenes in a different way. This intervention comes in the form of God entering creation truly with us: Emmanuel, Jesus. Through his interactions with people, Jesus demonstrated the character and behavior which God intended to be the norm for all humans. Through our gospel reading from Luke we have been journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem where Jesus will remain obedient to God's mission to redeem creation by going to his death upon a cross. Time and our understanding of Jesus' mission have lessened our understanding of how much of a scandal this would have been; how death at the hands of Rome and the current religious leader like a criminal would have been viewed despite all the wonderful things which Jesus had done among the people revealing God's love. Jesus has stated that his mission is to seek and find those children of God who are lost. In the passage today we have a description of an encounter Jesus has with a tax collector at Jericho, just before the end of his journey to Jerusalem where his complete obedience to God's plan will be revealed. Jesus is passing through Jericho evidently accompanied by a crowd because the tax collector, a man named Zacchaeus hearing about Jesus nearness had to take an unusual route to see him...he climbs up into a sycamore tree. This scene is recounted as favorite to teach young children in Sunday school...using the detail about Zacchaeus' size and the tree he climbed in order for the "wee little man" to catch a glimpse of Jesus. The passage begins not with the description of Zacchaeus' size, but with the information about who he was in the town...he was not only the tax collector, but the chief tax collector and rich. Within Luke those who have accumulated earthly wealth are not usually presented in a favorable light. This has been presented in several parables relating like that of the rich man who planned on building a barn for his abundant harvest to he could spend the rest of his life not worrying...or the rich man who did not notice Lazarus who suffered at his gates as he daily passed. The crowd around Jesus knows who Zacchaeus is, viewing him as dishonest and part of the reason they are oppressed. Tax collectors were loathed by the marginalized ones who are presented as cleaving to Jesus in Luke. This description is followed by the statement that Zacchaeus who hears that Jesus is passing through his town sets up the encounter because he was trying to see who Jesus was. This information sets up what becomes an ambiguity about what point Luke is trying to make by relating this event. Will Zacchaeus be a typical wealthy person or someone who leaves everything to follow Jesus? After announcing Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is so badly that he seeks to overcome the obstacle of his small stature that he abandons his dignity and standing to climb a tree, it becomes clear that Zacchaeus' is going to be different from the usual rich person in Luke, probably because this rich man is trying to see Jesus. The word translated as *try* is elsewhere, including in verse 10 of this passage, as *seek* or *search* or *strive*, and people who seek the right things in Luke tend to find them. In fact, as we hear in verse 10, people who seek Jesus tend to find it was actually Jesus who was seeking them all along. Within this passage we might find the good news about Zacchaeus might also be presaged by the use of the term short or little. Obviously this detail could just mean that he was a short person and that is how he ends up in the sycamore tree. But this term, in the superlative like here, is translated as *least*. This is how the word is presented in Luke 9:48 as Jesus saying: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the *least* among all of you is the greatest." So in a sense Luke may be giving us the image of a child and embracing his littleness, so to speak, as

Zacchaeus becomes one of these because he humbles himself to climb the tree in this way so he is in a position to see and welcome Jesus when he passes by. Jesus finds Zacchaeus in his tree and invites himself home with him, and Zacchaeus welcomes him rejoicing. Their interaction is met with grumbling among those who observe that (“once again”, they might be saying) Jesus is hanging about with sinners. This is similar to the grumbling among the Pharisees and the scribes about Jesus’ association with sinners and tax collectors found in Luke 15:2. That grumbling led to Jesus’ teaching parables of the lost and found sheep, coin, and son. So here too we have the appearance of a lost one who is about to be claimed. What follows is often presented as simply as the perfect conversion story of a repentant sinner. Zacchaeus resolves the issue of his wealth introduced earlier by saying he is giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back the defrauded fourfold what he has taken. But the use of the Greek present tense verbs means that this commitment is ongoing, not something that will only be done once, and it opens the possibility that Zacchaeus has already been doing these things. The way Jesus receives Zacchaeus resonates with that possibility not only because of his intentions toward the poor, but also because of the particular way in which Jesus responds. First he proclaims that salvation has come to that house, and we understand that the salvation is found in the very person of Jesus, who has come to seek out and save the lost, like the shepherd and the woman with her broom, and the welcoming father of the lost son. But Jesus here adds: “...because he too is a son of Abraham.” In other words, there is plenty of hope for the rich of this world as soon as they notice the Lazarus at the gate and do something serious about that. Even the most marginalized and despised of the rich, the tax collectors, have a place in the bosom of Abraham, in the community of the blessed, when they seek the right treasure, when their trust is in the right place. So Zacchaeus is doing just that, climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of the king, but the important observation to note is that when Jesus finds him, and us, he doesn’t continue on...instead as Jesus puts it, salvation comes to Zacchaeus’ house...Jesus follows him home. Notice that Zacchaeus is like the praying tax collector who goes home justified in the story Jesus told earlier, he does not confess his sin; nor does he repent. The commitments to the poor and defrauded can be viewed as repentance in this story, yet these commitments are not offered in response to anything Jesus has said to him to create the change of heart. Just as Jesus does not commend Zacchaeus for his penitence or his faith but simply accepts this lost one into the fold. By seeing him, calling him, staying with him, and blessing him, Jesus declares for all to hear that this one, even this chief tax collector, is a child of Abraham, and a child of God. Perhaps this story informs us that Jesus is again at work seeking out those who are lost who whether through their own seeking actions or the actions of those around them in order to find, save, and restore them to a right relationship with God. Reading this story as not one of the typical formula of repentance and forgiveness and encourages us not to reduce the miracle of salvation to a formula at all. It embodies the promise that anyone—anyone—who desires to see Jesus will. More than that, it tells us that anyone who desires to see Jesus will, in turn be seen by Jesus and in this way have their joy made complete. In seeking Jesus, Zacchaeus demonstrates that the desire to find Jesus comes with changes in attitude and actions in all aspects. His actions represent a reformation from the typical behavior of tax collections and other wealthy persons in Luke. Perhaps that is the connection of the passage to the event in our theological history that we honor today...being reformed is an ongoing commitment to the values found in God’s guidance and Jesus’

teachings...the result of having Jesus come and reside in our hearts and homes. May we continue to welcome him and allow the reformation within that he brings. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.