

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Martin Luther – Augustinian monk who in 1517 nailed the 95 theses outlining his disagreements with the Roman Catholic church, the Pope, and the selling of indulgences as a replacement to doing good works. Although originally his intent was to debate and reform Catholicism from within, he very quickly became the leader of an entirely new understanding of the way people are to relate to God, Scripture, and the church.

John Calvin – Next generation minister and theologian in Geneva who gathered the thoughts and understandings of this Reformed way of thinking about Scripture, our relationship to God, and the church, and systematically wrote it all down.

John Knox – Leader of the Church of Scotland's Reformation. He was a Scottish minister, theologian, and writer who was exiled to England for a portion of his life where he was licensed to work in the Church of England. He became the Royal Chaplain to King Edward the VI of England and had an influence on the text of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

When Mary Tudor ascended the throne of England, she re-established the Roman Catholic Church. Her historical nickname is Bloody Mary... if you're a Protestant. Next door they know her as Catholic Mary. The return to Roman Catholicism in England meant that John Knox was forced to flee and he headed to Geneva where he met John Calvin.

Upon "Foxy Knoxy's" eventual return to Scotland he led the Protestant Reformation in partnership with the Protestant nobility. The reformed churches in Scotland were governed by representative assemblies of 'elders'. The word for 'elders' in Greek is 'presbyteros'. Those who went to these churches became known as Presbyterians.

And for my final attempt at Latin for the month: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!*
The church reformed and always reforming...

This is a motto that even today shapes churches in the reformed tradition. It is a motto of who we are and who we intend to be. Because as much as these last few weeks of celebrating the 500th anniversary has been about the past, it is also about renewing our ministry and mission in the present.

Admittedly, there is a certain amount of irony in standing in the pulpit of a hallowed institution – whether it be the institution of MPC, or the institution of the Presbyterian denomination, or

the institution of religion itself – and talking about how we are called to be reformed and always reforming.

Reforming can mean adapting...

It can mean revolutionizing, restructuring, remodeling, rearranging, improving...

Reforming can mean that word, you know the one I'm talking about: change.

You've heard the denomination light bulb jokes, right?

How many Pentecostals does it take to change a lightbulb?

Ten. One to change it and 9 others to pray against the spirit of darkness.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb?

Ten. One to change it and 9 to say how much they like the old one.

How many charismatics to change a lightbulb?

Three. One to cast it out, and two to catch it when it falls.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb?

CHANGE?!

And yet, according to the Word of God, and the call of the Spirit, we are the church reformed and always reforming.

Why?

Because our sinful nature – our total depravity - assures us that we don't have it right yet.

Openness to being reformed comes not only because of who we are but out of who God is. The God "whom alone we worship and serve" (Brief Statement of Faith) is a living God. God is not bound, either to our tradition or to our particular contemporary context. God's revelation is always a gift, never a given.

And this has always been the case.

The Book of Acts is an account of the very early church "right after Jesus had risen from the dead, messed with everyone's heads, grilled them all a fish breakfast on the beach, and had a few more choice meals, he then ascended into heaven. But not before telling his follower to tell the story about him to all peoples and baptizing them in the name of the Trinity."ⁱ

Up until this point, their main focus is convincing Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. There are strict laws keeping them from moving outside the boundaries of what they know and who they know.

But then Philip goes and preaches in Samaria. I think most of you have heard the story of the Good Samaritan enough to know that Samaria is outside the usual boundaries of where Judaic law would allow them to be. Philip started spreading the Good News in Samaria, and a former magician was baptized by him. Peter and John had their own hesitations, but they followed Philip to Samaria and then they returned to Jerusalem.

Then we get to:

Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.*

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."

And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

This is the Word of the Lord...

"The first Gentile convert ended up being a black sexual minority."ⁱⁱ

Reformed and always reforming...

The law of God is not something to be taken lightly by anyone. It certainly wasn't taken lightly by the men who walked with Jesus and were literally commissioned by him to go and make disciples of all nations. But the law – specifically Deuteronomy 23:1 - names that those who are outside the sexual norm like the eunuch, are NOT to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

On what basis does Philip ignore this command?

In the first reading this morning Jesus is asked: *Which commandment in the law is the greatest? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And... you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

If loving God, and loving our neighbor, are what all of the rest of our law are to hang on, of course we are always reforming. Those things are very hard to do, and as mentioned before, we are big-time sinners; totally depraved.

We must be reformed, and constantly reforming in order to move towards who God is calling us to be. Because wherever God is calling, God is already there.

The eunuch that Philip baptized was returning from Jerusalem having gone to worship there. He was in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah. But I “wonder if he was also familiar with Deuteronomy, specifically 23:1... this law strictly forbids a eunuch from entering the temple.”

“Their transgression of gender binaries and inability to fit into proper categories made them profane. (The church – as it was established at that point – had no room for them.) But the eunuch went to Jerusalem to worship despite the fact that in all likelihood he would have been turned away there by the religious establishment. The eunuch sought God despite the fact that he had heard that there was no love for him there.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So who was converted that day in the chariot, was it the eunuch?
Or was it Philip?

God was already with the eunuch.
It was the church that hadn't gotten there yet.

We've thrown a lot of history at you the last few weeks. But the Reformation isn't just about 500 years ago, it's about who we are as a congregation and as individuals today.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!

The motto of the reformation calls us to something more radical than we think about on your average Sunday morning in the pew. It challenges the habits and agendas we easily fall into. We worship a living God, and are reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God, and the call of the Spirit.

And so today – as our centering prayer - we ask you:
How do you think the church needs to reform?

Take a few moments... it can be this church specifically, or in more general terms: How do you think the church needs to reform?

In your bulletin is a post-it note. Go ahead and write on that note how you think the church need to reform... and then come up, and place it on the door.

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. Nashville: Jericho Books, p. 89.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 93.