

Sunday, October 30, 2011

Reformation Sunday

This is my muddler.

It is a one of my many kitchen gadgets. And it does a great job of one specific task. Take something like a mint leaf. Then turn it into a mashed up, torn apart mess which in the process releases its flavorful oils. This is great for flavoring things but not so good for the leaf.

It is a wonderful metaphor of one of the challenges of the spiritual life and for the life of the church. Life and history sometimes has a tendency to get us all muddled. As we go along in life, we live with so many things pulling us in many directions, our desires pull us one way or another, the bumps and bruises of life sometimes squish our spirit, squelch our dreams, or lead us to forget what we are truly about. And we wind up muddled, squished out of shape with the essence of our life squeezed or smashed out of us. I think we have all experienced this.

This is also the story of the church. Again and again and again. We started off with Jesus in our midst and the Holy Spirit burning like fires upon our head. Then we bump against the culture around us, we get distracted by the desires and comforts of this world, we get lost in our own egos or get squeezed by the pressing demands of our world, or by organizational demands and survival and we forget our essence. Again and again we have become muddled. Muddled as we got swept into the Roman Empire and when that empire fell, when we became enmeshed in the power and feudal structures, when we became lost in human authority, human greed and human works and now we have become lost in human pride and self centeredness.

But this is also not the whole story, for while we have again and again become muddled, the story of the church is also the story of God's faithfulness. In the fifth century it was the rise of the church and desert fathers and monasticism that called us back to a life in the image of Christ, in the process reforming what had become a muddled church. In the 10th and 11th century it was the rise of the Gregorian Reforms and the monastic reforms at Cluny and subsequently the Cistercian, Franciscan and

Dominican orders that reformed a church that had become muddled in the power, politics and money of the time.

And again during the time of Luther the church had become muddled. The church had become a power equal to the emperor. And it had turned in upon itself. It began to believe that it was the determiner of truth and held the keys of salvation. And it used these powers as humans do, to build great palaces for it by stealing from the poor, by selling indulgence, get out of purgatory free cards, so that the church could pay for its power and the building of St. Peter's. In the midst of this, the Church confined thousands of the faithful to monasteries, which could have been fine except they had forgotten their call to be schools of love and places of prayer. Instead they had become places where people worked for merits, where people forgot that salvation was a gift, given in grace. Instead they taught the faithful to do for themselves what is only and always a gift from God, salvation. Instead of turning people towards God's gift of salvation, they turned people in upon themselves, in upon their own good works, in upon a human church. In the process the church had become muddled.

So what was the reformation about that we celebrate today? In many ways it was about one thing. For at its heart the reformation was about remembering that it is God and not humans that are at the center of all life. This is what the great teaching of the reformation is really about. For when Luther and the reformers taught that "We are Justified By Grace through faith" what this did was again place God as the source, the only source of our salvation, while reminding us that we are made right with God, not by what we do, but because it is God, in Jesus, that came to us and healed our separation from God. It is God's action and not our action that saves us. It is God that is the heart of salvation.

This is also why we place such a great value on scripture. For if God is at the centre, then it is not human teachings that that are our authority, but rather God's Word. This is what is at the heart of our declaring that sola (only) scripture is our authority. It is not about the book, or the words on the page, but it is about the God who's teaching and very being is revealed in and through Scripture that is our only authority. Sola Scripture was and is about placing God at the centre. This is what the reformation is about.

And if God is the centre, when we stand before God, the reality is that every single one of us are sinners. There is none of us who are holy on our own, none of us are any better than another. None of us thus can stand above another; none of us can rightly stand between you and God. This is not about smashing us down, but rather

realizing that we all rely on grace, and that God comes to us all, equally and fully. Which also means that we are all called. When God was again placed at the centre of all of our lives it reminded us that by our baptism we are all priests, we are all given a holy calling, to be lived as seriously as we would expect of any pastor, priest, monk or nun. The gift of the reformation was to remind us that God is the centre, not just of the lives of some, but rather at the lives of everyone.

This also means that it might be time to put away our statues of Luther, for the reformation was not centered around Luther, but God.

If we become muddled, or rather it is better to say, in our muddledness, no one, no person can reform us. For who can reknit a mint leaf that has been muddled let alone a human soul? There is only one who can reform us, that is God. Sure God works through people, but it is only around God, it is only by the power of God that we can be reformed and take again the shape we were intended to have. As John reminds us it is only the life of Jesus and his teaching that will free us from our muddled state.

And the same is true today. We live in a very muddled time especially for the church in its broader expressions. And we are in no position to point fingers. Lets face it, for so many of us believers our lives have become muddled, smashed up, squeezed, pressed and twisted until it seems like the essence of our life of faith has been lost or at least painfully watered down. So who will reform us now? Who will reform our church and our lives?

There is only one who can knit back together muddled leave or a muddled life. His name is Jesus, God the Father, God the Holy Spirit. It is around God and by the work of God that we can again being reformed. It is already under way. I have seen it in people's lives, I am seeing in the life of this church and the broader church. God's Spirit is on the move and blowing. It blows as people return to pray and seek out directions and others to deepen their life of faith. It blows as people again return to scripture, not to reaffirm their own understandings, but so that they may know God so that God can shape their lives. It blows as people turn out of faith to care for their neighbor, to share Christ with those whose spirits hunger and seek a world that reflects God's justice. It is blowing as churches seek God, and dare to again place Christ at the centre.

There is a danger in reformation Sunday. That we turn it into a Sunday of history, a Sunday that celebrates history and people who died long ago. It is dangerous because it misses out on that God is again as God has always been, reforming; reforming God's

church and God's people. For the reformation is not about history, but the present, the reformation is today, as God is calling again us to place God at the centre, Christ as the heart of our lives and our church.

Amen