

God With Us

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday  
October 30, 2011

Joshua 3:7-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

"By this you shall know that among you is the living God. . . ." -- Joshua 3:10a

Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday is one of those days when a preacher has to make one of four choices. You can ransack Scripture to try to find verses about Martin Luther, the Reformation and Protestantism, or the other controlling ideas of the day and try to preach an expository sermon. Good luck trying to find Martin Luther in the Bible.

Or you can preach on one or more of the lectionary readings appointed for the day and see if any of them can be pressed into service for a talk about the Reformation.

Or you can dispense with the Bible altogether and preach to the occasion, which often turns into either a kind of potted church history lecture or a Protestant pep rally with shades of chauvinism.

Or you can try to amalgamate the first three options into a sermon that will reveal some more of the wisdom and beauty of Scripture, teach a little bit about where we've come from and how we got here, and celebrate the diversity of the church and the distinctiveness of our branch of the family tree. I'm going for option four this morning.

I love Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday. I love it first because it's one of the three occasions in a church's life when the sanctuary is draped in red, and our sanctuary looks particularly good in red. The other two red occasions are Pentecost and an ordination to the ministry, both of which are focused on the Holy Spirit.

Red was used on Reformation Day, as it used to be called, to signify the blood of the martyrs, Protestant and Catholic, that was shed in the battles for the Christian church that raged across western Europe for about 120 years.

We don't forget that suffering, inflicted and endured on both sides, but we've come in more recent years to view that tragic period as more than needless carnage. We've come to understand that the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was one of many moments in the two-thousand-year life of the church when the Holy Spirit, signified by red, led women and men of great conviction to take enormous risks to themselves and their loved ones in order to reform, repair, and renew an institution they loved dearly and deeply.

We credit an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, of course, with striking the match that set the European church ablaze with reform, but that very large group of Christians we know today as Protestants were then and are today, we believe, led by the Holy Spirit, the very same Holy Spirit who led and leads the entire Christian church, including its Catholic majority, today.

That's the Reconciliation part of the day's name. We believe in the ongoing work of God's Spirit, and that work, as Paul calls it in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, is "the ministry of reconciliation." That's the

essence of the gospel: re-uniting that which has been separated.

Is that not what we see in the stories about Jesus? The title for this morning's sermon, in fact, is one of the names often given to Jesus – Emmanuel – which means “God with us.” We use that title and that idea not to paint God as an angry old coot who's sent us to our room for misbehaving and whose wrath needs placating – the sort of “We're so bad and God's so mad” kind of theology that once was prominent – but rather to remind ourselves that the power to overcome our deepest estrangements – from creation, from one another, from our deepest and truest selves, and from the Great I Am who is the Cause of it all – those several and painful estrangements have decisively been and can be further overcome because of Emmanuel – God being with us.

That's what the ark symbolized for our ancient forebears, the Hebrew people, about whom Lois read for us a few minutes ago. As they were about to embark on that great adventure of trying to establish a holy commonwealth in a holy land – trying to make themselves God with us, in other words – they carried in their midst a wooden chest containing the Ten Commandments. The ancient Israelites regarded those ten commandments as an essential summary of all of the 613 instructions the rabbis regard to this day as the number of laws in the Torah.

The ark and the two stone tablets of the law inside were the most precious objects in ancient Israel; so precious, in fact, that a couple of centuries after the events described in our reading from Joshua, the Israelites built the most magnificent temple they could afford to house that sacred object. And the sacredness of the object gradually became attached to the building that housed it, and the temple itself became a holy place.

That's what happens when God is with you: the world becomes a surprisingly sacred place. Nature isn't nature anymore; it's creation, a beautiful, bountiful, and sometimes heartbreaking gift from a loving creator.

The Bible isn't just a grab-bag of stories and regulations from a bygone era anymore; it's the carefully assembled collection of love notes of a still-speaking God that is filled with love and wisdom for those smart enough and humble enough to receive those notes in the spirit in which they were sent.

And the church – the church in its Orthodox shape, its Catholic shape, it's Protestant shape, and all the shapes that defy easy labels – the church is no longer the maddening factions of frightened and fallible and ferociously flawed human beings; it is the crucified and glorified body of Christ whose precious members are the redeemed children of God.

That's what happens when we allow God to be with us, truly and honestly and consistently with us. Every reformation becomes another opportunity for reconciliation. Every attempt to get it right is another chance to hear again what our still-speaking God is saying not to those we think are wrong, but to those of us who think we have it right. Every effort to join our siblings in works of justice and mercy becomes another occasion for getting to know them better, understand their perspective more clearly, and appreciate their gifts to the world more fully. God with us – in written instructions and story, in the revelation of protest and reform, in the ever-unfolding presence of the Holy Spirit – God with us makes these and all things possible.

Let me close now by holding up for you two examples where I have seen reformation and reconciliation at work recently and near at hand.

The other night, a few families in the church got together for supper. Some of the families, like the Yuskos, the Burkhardts, the Wilsons, and the Dugovics, have children who are teenagers or older. They've been through the experience of having raised small children, which is one of the most demanding periods in any family's life. The other families at supper – the Schaums and the Mahoneys – are at that very demanding stage now, and the purpose of the supper was to bring those two groups of families together, so that the older families could share with the younger families their experience, their wisdom, and their support. How successful the evening was you'll need to find out from those who attended.

But during our conversation, one of the things we discovered about ourselves is that of the six families represented at the table, five of them were what we used to call mixed marriages – one person was raised Catholic, one person was raised Protestant. Love brought people together whose churches, to this day, remain

apart, and one of the reasons I give thanks for all those attractions that bring people together in families – including sex – is because they help families do what churches cannot: see past our differences to the deeper bonds of love and commitment that make unity and joy possible.

All of those families – and I know of several more here at Faith – who have reunited a divided church in their own small and quiet way, are incarnations of the gospel – God with us – and indictments of the institutional church. I give thanks that you have allowed the Holy Spirit to be with you in your lives and in your relationships and the witness you are to the power of reconciling love.

I also give thanks for one of my ministerial buddies, the Reverend John Thomas Lane. Father Lane, some of you may recall from the newspaper coverage of his appointment a couple of years ago, is the pastor of St. Paschal Baylon Church in Highland Heights. He is my go-to guy when I have questions about the liturgy – that is, the physical form of our worship – because he’s undertaken a great deal of specialized training in how the church has worshiped over the centuries and across cultures.

But Father Lane’s also a man of deep spiritual generosity and grace-filled open-heartedness, who brings that way of being Catholic to our local Hillcrest Clergy Association. This is new for that group, and it’s a welcome addition and cause for joy. Father Lane has also opened the doors of his church building to all of us in the Hillcrest area for an ecumenical Thanksgiving service at 3:00 p.m. on November 20th; you’ll be hearing more about that soon. I’ll be participating in that service and I hope many of you will be, too. We Protestants and Catholics don’t do together nearly as much as we could and should to bind up the church’s wounds, so I hope you will witness with your presence at this upcoming service your desire and effort to overcome unnecessary divisions. I give thanks to God for the priest who’s allowing God to be with him as he ministers to all of us in this time and place.

The work of reforming and reconciling never ends, and it’s never been the exclusive franchise of the church. That pesky Holy Spirit, symbolized by our red paraments this morning, never can seem to leave well enough alone. That Spirit seems always to be stirring up someone’s heart to help bring us a little closer to God. A Paul of Tarsus. An Augustine of Hippo. A Teresa of Calcutta. A Martin of Birmingham. A Gail and a Frank, a Cynthia and a Mike. All these, and so many others, quietly, gently, lovingly at work in partnership with the Great I Am.

What a blessing. What a gift. What a joy. Thanks be to God.