

Reformation of Courageous Compassion

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Reformation Sunday, October 28, 2018

Job 40:1-14/Mark 10:46-52

I read an article this week by Rev. Chris Furr, pastor of Covenant Christian Church in Carey, North Carolina. What he wrote disturbed and challenged me. Although he did not reveal how he voted in the last presidential election, he did say that he spent the next day wondering how each person he encountered voted. In particular, he wondered about the white Southern men who looked like him.



Later that day, he confessed to his wife, "I feel like a lion. White men have always been the apex predator, and we have fed our top social status by repressing people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community, but Jesus has ruined my appetite."

It was his wife's reply that really challenged me. She said, "Yes, but you still walk the world as a lion. That's what everyone sees."

As a white Southern man, I have not always been aware of how that gave me such a privileged position. Oh, I was sometimes victimized because of whom I loved, but not because I am a white man. When people look at me, they see a lion.



October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Our own Dede Bartlett brought together all the clergy in town to learn more about this issue. She is a national leader on this subject. Most of the time with observances like this, we might simply put something in the bulletin or make an announcement; as I worked on this sermon, however, I began to feel that the Reformation is more than related to this important, disturbing issue.

Martin Luther, who wrote “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” our opening hymn, nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the Wittenberg Church on October 31, 1517, 501 years ago. It was a simple act of courageous protest that sparked the reformation of a church that was powerful and corrupt.



Luther was not the kind of person you would expect to reform institutions that defend the status quo of the wealthy and powerful. His father held leases on mines and refineries and was a wealthy political leader. Luther's father wanted him to become a lawyer, but, riding his horse back to school one day, Luther was nearly struck by lightning. After his electrifying conversion, he promised God he would become a monk.

That may seem like a humble calling, but he soon got his doctorate and was appointed the vicar of the province of Saxony, which meant he was the overseer of 11 monasteries.

His biography makes it even more surprising that he would be the one to challenge the church at its very heart. Although there were many issues Luther raised, none hit the church where it hurt—in its pocketbook—more than his opposition to the selling of indulgences.

The church allowed people to pay to obtain forgiveness and to avoid hell. Bill often told me that it was my fault when people in the church misbehaved or were not generous. His rationale was that I was the one who said there is no hell.

Now I have nothing to threaten you with.

Bill was right that the threat of hell motivates at least as many people spiritually as does the promise of heaven. Luther insisted that neither was the church's to offer, but, instead, life in all its eternity is a gift of God by grace.

When people stopped buying indulgences, the church had to find another revenue stream. Luther was labeled a heretic and might have been burned at the stake. His own upper-class father was furious with him because he thought he had wasted his education.

But Jesus changed Luther's appetite. The church gave him a chance to recant and rejoin the insiders, but he was emphatic, saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other."



That courageous stand led to Luther starting a movement of reformation, of which our church is a part. In other words, it all turned out alright. However, Luther did not know it would. In fact, everyone else before him who had followed this course had been jailed or executed.

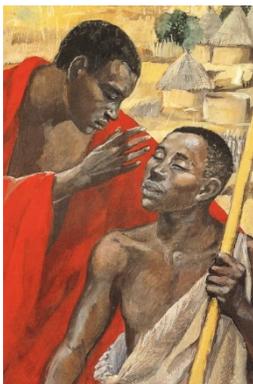
As an educated, affluent, white man of privilege, Luther risked everything because he refused to surrender his principles or to remain judiciously silent. That is the problem today, though it is not our theology being compromised as it was in Luther's day. It is our morality. The church has surrendered its moral authority in the name of political expediency, and we have sold our souls out of fear that we might offend donors or alienate people in a different political tribe.

Make no mistake, our role as a church is to avoid partisan politics without abdicating our responsibility to moral leadership. Racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are evils, no matter who is in office. We who are privileged have responsibilities, and the more privilege we have the greater that responsibility is. We cannot abdicate our duty to our children and grandchildren to leave a better world than one in which someone attempts to blow up political opponents or shoot up people because they are Jewish or black.

I appreciate Dede Bartlett's leadership in worship today as our lay reader, and I appreciate her work locally and nationally to make us all more aware of the epidemic of domestic violence. She was honored as a "Voice of Courage" for her work. I am sure that is just one of a multitude of honors and awards that have been bestowed on Dede, but it is this one by which I want us to be inspired today.



You and I must become voices of courage and compassion on behalf of those who are being neglected, abused, marginalized, discounted, and discarded.



In this morning's Gospel lesson, crowds of people gathered to hear Jesus or just to see him pass by. In the crowd that day in Jericho was a blind man named Bartimaeus. It is interesting that we know his name. We don't know the name of the woman at the well, or the woman with the issue of blood, or even the Syrophenician woman, but men often are named when women are not.

When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by, he began to shout for him, but the religious people in the crowd sternly ordered him to shut up. Bartimaeus,

however, would not be silenced. If he been a woman, she might have been intimidated or forced into silence by the men in the crowd. That's how it has been throughout most of human history, which is why we who have a voice have a duty to use it.

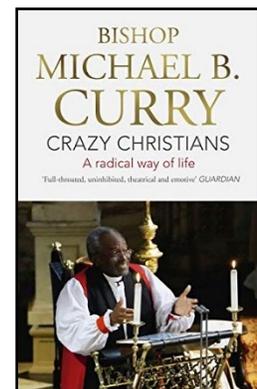
Yes, it takes courage for men like Martin Luther to stand up, but the truth is we men have been socialized our entire lives to believe it is our right to be seen and heard. We are the lions.

Women and children, the poor and people of color have been given a completely different message. They too often have been made to believe they somehow deserve the neglect or abuse they receive or that they did something to bring it on themselves.

That is why our souls must be reformed by the Spirit, so we can find the courage to speak out for compassion and justice.

In his book "Crazy Christians," Michael Curry, the recently-elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, tells a story about a childhood conversation with his father, a Baptist minister:

*When my siblings and I were little children, my father sat us down one evening to talk. We knew something was up. My father and other clergy had led some local efforts for civil rights. That night, Daddy told us he might have to go to jail the next day because he was going to be a part of a protest. Then he told us something I still remember: **"You must always be willing to give yourself for a higher cause. Our lives are part of something greater than ourselves."***



THAT is the reformation we need today. As individual followers of Jesus, and as a church, we must throw off our cloak of apathy and give ourselves to a higher cause because we believe our lives are part of something greater than ourselves.

Those of us with privilege, resources, position, and power must have our eyes opened so we see what is broken and live our lives for something greater.

In May of 1994, Kevin Carter won a Pulitzer Prize for a photograph. Two months later, he committed suicide. A close friend of his said that, after shooting the photo of the starving girl being followed by a vulture, Kevin



“sat under a tree and cried.” He could not distance himself from the horror of what he saw. He could not un-see the suffering he had seen.

Seeing can be dangerous, especially if you don't do something about what you have seen. Today, spiritual and cultural blindness is much more common than physical blindness. In our comfort, we try to turn a blind eye to what we don't WANT to see, but pretending not to see is not blindness. We still are accountable for doing something or doing nothing.

Bartimaeus thought seeing was his right, and Jesus apparently agreed. I think Jesus wants us to see, too, to see ourselves and our privilege and responsibility. It also is our gift of opportunity to be reformed. Only then can we join Bartimaeus and follow Jesus in reforming the world.

Amen.