

“Who Owns the Truth?”  
 I Thessalonians 2: 9-13  
 Matthew 23: 1-12  
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 Reformation Sunday

We are choking on information: hundreds of TV stations, thousands of newspapers and magazines and books, more Web pages than the stars of the sky or the sands of the shore. Never in the history of the world has humanity had access to so much information. And still, we hunger for the truth.

Part of our problem is the profusion of sources: to whom do we turn? And part of our problem is our leering of spin: in whom do we trust? And part of our problem lies in the sheer complexity of the world today – in global economics ... genetic engineering ... climate change ... trade agreements ... catastrophes of nature and disasters of human origins: how do we know what is just? How do we even know what is true?

I find it helpful to remember that we are not the first to experience such rapid change. Throughout the history of the Western world, periods of upheaval have rocked the world: the reach of the Roman Empire; the emergence of the Renaissance; the discovery of the New World; the explosion of Industry and Commerce.

History warns us that upheavals of this order breed confusion and dismay as we try to integrate such rapid change. The longing to preserve tradition, to hang onto the familiar and, for those in power, to defend the old order – all these conflict with innovation and possibility and the reordering of power and values ushered in by the new. Neither defense nor innovation necessarily yields truth. Yet what I find remarkable – and superbly comforting – is that such periods of change often become creative and even clarifying seasons. Such was the era of the Reformation.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the wisdom and the legacy of those who sought the truth in the upheaval of their day. The Presbyterian Church is a child of those trailblazers, and I like to think the DNA of those Reformers is still found coursing through our blood. We have a lot to learn from them.

The period of the Reformation – roughly the 16<sup>th</sup> century -- was an era of astonishing change and innovation. The Renaissance had transformed the world of art and architecture, reviving dimension and nature and humanism and even mathematics from the dust of the antiquities. Scientific discoveries exploded, as trans-oceanic explorers brought back their fanciful discoveries from unknown regions. Political upheaval brought the Holy Roman Empire to its knees, replaced by modern nation-states, each with their own colonial ambitions.

Out of this chaos emerged remarkable clarity and brilliance: DaVinci ... Galileo ... Columbus.... And in the sphere of religion, the Reformers ascended: Luther and Calvin and Knox. We take for granted that the scientific discoveries of that age still carry import for our time. I submit that the religious breakthroughs of that time bear acknowledging as well. Let me point out a few gems in our inheritance.

Gems like the sovereignty of God, which claims that the world is not merely arbitrary, but God ultimately reigns over the universe, bringing order out of chaos, life out of death, hope out of despair, which is why we need no fortress of fundamentalism or nationalism to protect us.

Gems like salvation through grace alone, reminding us that neither the holy church nor a formula for being born again nor our own good works earn our redemption; nor do our modern

talismans of money or power or status guarantee us our value. The faithfulness of Jesus Christ has saved us, out of God's deep grace, and we are freed to lean hard on that astonishing and undeserved mercy.

Gems like the signs of the true church being only two: Word and sacrament. Reformers had their own virulent "worship wars"; Calvin rid the Geneva sanctuary of its pipe organ, its statues, and its stained glass windows. He would be rolling in his grave here. But his legacy is that Reformed worship is always in the "vernacular," allowing every generation to express their faith in their own language, whether traditional or contemporary.

Gems like the priesthood of all believers. The Reformers celebrated neither a hierarchy of holiness nor a secularization of life. Instead, each of us is baptized to serve the Lord in daily life, so that everything becomes an expression of our faith: our family life; the way we conduct ourselves in commerce; our care for the vulnerable in our communities and development among the forgotten around the world. The priesthood of all believers also means that there is no authority telling us what to believe; as equal members of a faith community, we have to figure it out for ourselves. This is a great responsibility, requiring the religious education of the laity. Which is why right next to Calvin's church in Geneva, he established a Lay Academy, to equip the saints for their living out of faith.

And finally, the crown jewel of them all: the primacy of Scripture as the Word of God. And that's what I want to focus on today. For the genius of the Reformation is its return to the authority of Scripture ... not as an ossified relic, but as the living voice of the Lord. And I think this is *crucial* for our times, as we discern and, I hope, fight the heresies of our day. Heresy isn't a word we bat around much anymore, so let me be clear: I'm not speaking of what the rest of the world ought to believe about Scripture. By heresy I mean the internal battles we wage about what *we* believe as Christians. And believe me, these battles matter.

I see three heresies swirling around Scripture in the American church today. The first is *literalism*: the belief that every word in the Bible was literally voiced by God in heaven and transcribed by the authors of these books ... sort of an automatic writing approach to Scripture. Often this belief morphs either into a recipe book for life instead of a rich compilation of poetry and history and apologetics and mystic vision. Scholar Huston Smith calls this approach "fact fundamentalism." While I quibble with Marcus Borg on some other matters, I love what he says about this reductionist approach to the Bible: "while 'conservatives insist that everything in the Bible must be factual in order to be true,' their more liberal scholarly counterparts 'seek to rescue a few facts from the fire. Both camps seem largely unaware,' he adds, 'that we live in the only culture in human history that has equated truth with factuality'" (cited by Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (NY: Riverhead, 1998), 189-90). Truth, I've often said, is much bigger than fact, and a literalist approach doesn't begin to do justice to the rich diversity and nuance of the truth expressed in Scripture.

The second heresy I see is *relativism*: the opposite of literalism, relativism reduces Scripture to historic religious documents that may or may not carry spiritual authority. If one finds meaning in them, by virtue of one's tradition or upbringing or personal experience, that's great, but (a) don't push your beliefs on me, and (b) Christianity doesn't have a choke-hold on the truth. Now, I agree heartily with a modest approach to proclaiming one's faith; and I also agree that Scripture is not the only place we discover the truth. Calvin himself said as much. But if we believe everything is true, then we believe nothing is true. So while I agree with those United Church of Christ ads: "God is still speaking," I also believe that God didn't just start talking to us today. If we want to be able to discern what God is saying now, we need to listen

carefully to what God has said before. As Christians, the place that we look first is in the Old and New Testaments of Scripture.

The final heresy is simply *ignorance*: a profound disregard for knowing what is in the Bible. Author Kathleen Norris hits the nail on the head when she says that “mainstream Protestant pastors take it for granted that their congregations won’t know much about the Bible.” She also notes the stunning irony that even though the Reformation made access to the Bible its rallying cry – *sola scriptura* -- today it’s Roman Catholic churches where the most scripture is read every Sunday – an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, an Epistle and a Gospel – while in the most contemporary (often conservative) churches you find the *least* amount of scripture – one lesson, sometimes just one verse (pp. 189-90). Oh, well.

There is a different option. The Reformers believed that Scripture is a *living* Word, with power to transform our lives. The apostle Paul says it this way: “We give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God ... you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is ... at work in you believers” (I Thess. 2:13).

And this is why I love Scripture. Not because I’m supposed to. Not because I revere tradition. But because I have seen the power of the Word of God to transform people’s lives – including mine.

I haven’t always been so clear. Even when I studied the Bible in college and seminary, I was intrigued by it, and I enjoyed diving into the deep waters of historical criticism and comparative mythology and original languages. I love to study, and I love the arts and anthropology and sociology and psychology, and the bible is filled with these things. And I loved the Lord, too, as best I could, and I knew without a doubt that the Lord loved me. But still, the Bible wasn’t a living word in my life.

The change happened gradually for me. First, it was great preachers who got through to me, that the Bible wasn’t a dead book from long ago but a fabulously current commentary on morals and family and ethics and politics. I finally “got it.” Second, it was great teachers who connected the dots for me; Luke Timothy Johnson in particular, then at Yale Divinity School, taught an incredible course on spirituality, sexuality, and possessions in light of the New Testament. Later, a few years into my ministry, it was Bible study with peers that grabbed my heart and twisted it again. For nearly twenty years I’ve taken a week every January to sit with the Moveable Feast study group, about 20 Presbyterian pastors, as we wrestle hard with the assigned readings for worship for the year ahead. It is rigorous work – we each prepare two scholarly papers with sermon ideas – and we sweat to offer our finest efforts. First it was out of competition and fear of failure, we all admit it, but now it’s because we love each other and want to support each other’s ministry, and want to offer God our very best work. And every year, after a week together, we leave completely drenched in Scripture, overwhelmed and transformed by the living Word of God. And finally, just a few years ago, as I’ve told you before, I started reading Scripture daily. And it has changed my life.

So for all these reasons, I want to offer you that which I have received. I want to share the Scripture with you. I don’t know how I’m going to pull it off yet – it is a mystery to me! – but I have made it my priority to teach Bible study ... not once a week, or twice a week, but three or four or more times a week, as many as I can possibly manage. In a few weeks, we will give you the chance to sign up – with choices of times and the kind of group you’d like to be a part of. This does not in any way replace the Bible studies that are already going on: deep transformation is happening, week after week, on Sunday mornings in Ellen’s class, on Wednesdays in the women’s group, on Fridays in the men’s group, and so on. But I want to be

sure that everyone who wants to study Scripture can: old people, preschool moms, working me, teenagers. Not for the sake merely of Biblical knowledge, but for the living power of God's word to guide our daily lives.

Maybe you read the Bible every day already; maybe you've studied it deeply over the years. If so, you may even consider leading a study some time. But maybe you've tried to read the Bible before and found nothing there but dead words. If that's the case, please don't be discouraged. We start where we are, and that will be enough. Kathleen Norris, once more, says it this way:

“Many people ... feel an absence in their lives, expressed as an acute desire for ‘something more,’ a spiritual home, a community of faith. But when they try to read the Bible they end up throwing it across the room. To me, this seems encouraging, a place to start, a sign of real engagement with the God who is revealed in scripture” (p. 196).

I propose that we try again, together – not to own the truth, but to seek it; in the ancient words, the living Word that has the power to change our very lives. Amen.