

SAVING THE WRONG PEOPLE; LUKE 19:1-10; OCTOBER 30, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It's Reformation Sunday. We are hearing the glorious music of JS Bach today who is often referred to as the fifth evangelist – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and JS Bach – because his compositions orchestral, chamber, and vocal were inspired by the liturgy of the Lutheran Church, that is, the seasonal reading and proclamation of the Word and in particular the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Bach composed nearly solely for the church and created enough works in his lifetime to play or sing new compositions every week for five years. "Prolific" would be a vast understatement.

The Reformation was, of course, launched by Martin Luther, his close reading of the bible and his conclusion that the Roman Church in which he took holy orders held to doctrine and practices alien and contradictory to biblical teaching. Luther's proposed 95 reforms were met with an immediate and angry call to recant everything he had proposed; to which he refused and went into hiding as his life was in danger.

Luther was, after all, taking on a huge and powerful institution. He was a medieval whistle-blower. It is easy to forget that the church then was to society what multinational corporations are to our world; self-preserving and unbending.

Calvin was no less radical; he raised the bar; he said no reforms of the Roman model would hold up to the scrutiny of the bible. And so Calvin retreated to Geneva, Switzerland where he established a renegade church based on the model of the early church with presbyters or elders, elected by the people who made decisions for the church; an early form of modern democracy.

These were times, in the 16th century, when wars were fought over the form of church government, the meaning of the sacraments, the singing of hymns and ultimately over the understanding of salvation. These were also times when a rising entrepreneurial class of merchants and business people began exerting their position and power in opposition to the church and landed gentry. What we refer to as the Reformation was really a century long conflagration of conflicting social, political, economic and religious forces.

We are living the Prayer of St. Francis these weeks leading up to Generosity Sunday on November 13 when we will dedicate our time, talent and treasure for the year ahead. Today the theme from Francis is "seek to love, rather than to be loved."

The reading today is the story of Zacchaeus – found only in Luke; this little tax collector seeks out Jesus and when Jesus finds him, Zacchaeus turns his life around, makes amends to those he has offended or defrauded.

All of the above: the music of JS Bach, the first Reformers – Luther and Calvin; the rising class of activists who funded the Reformed church and Zacchaeus illustrate moral courage, the willingness to do what is right, not just hope or wish but to take concrete action for the good.

It may not be too far fetched to say that we are living an era of Reformation, on the eve of some deeper societal shift when many public and private institutions are broken at best and betray the public trust at worst. Every age has its own challenges but ours seems to have more than its share.

This year's presidential campaign is a barometer of a vast divide in our nation between two almost completely different Americas – those who have benefitted from education and the economy and those whose education and circumstances belong to an older economy and struggle to make ends meet.

What the divide represents is an America that is functioning and one that isn't; an America that is working and one that is broken and forgotten. This past week I heard a documentary on gang violence on Long Island – where old, stable communities and school systems have been taken over by gangs and a level of violence one law enforcement official described after six teenagers were recently killed, as depraved.

If we are seeking to love rather than to be loved we have little choice but to confront the dysfunction in our society and find ways to bridge the social and economic chasm that separates cities; that divides inner and outer ring suburbs; that marginalizes rural communities.

Yes, we can and should 'seek to love' in one on one relationships, in families and neighborhoods, with colleagues at work and in the community.

But to avoid the larger forces that disrupt and divide the nation would turn our call to live Francis's Prayer into a mere Hallmark greeting card. These are times, like the Reformation, that demand a different way of conducting our national life; a way of administering our society that shares our resources more equitably through systems of education, health care and in the work place. The old myth that anyone can make it in this country who wants to has been exposed by legions of angry citizens willing to elect a dictatorial leader who will dismantle the system of privilege and power that has ignored them.

The question is what will 'seeking to love rather than to be loved' look like on November 9th. Regardless of who wins the election how will we, Westminster, how will you and I as followers of the Prince of Peace seek to love?

Unless that translates into some moral action that attempts to right the wrongs that keep people in poverty, wrongs that prevent fair and living wages, in exchange for rights that allow for affordable education and a path to upward economic mobility; unless our opportunities and resources are available to all people then, judging from the visceral, wide-spread anger that has galvanized 40% or more of the population all we will be doing is delaying either a revolution, or the rise of a leader who will render our system of checks and balances a thing of the past.

Without moral courage our love will have no justice; the forces of greed and dysfunction that feed the powerful and leave the poor and marginalized behind will determine our future.

What is moral courage? I witnessed it at Auburn Theological Seminary last week. A white evangelical, a black pastor and a young female rabbi served on a panel that responded to questions about the times in which we live and how they are dealing with life personally and professionally.

While the impending election and candidates are the backdrop to the issues and challenges they discussed, there was not one reference to the candidates or their policy positions.

Rather they talked about their efforts to listen to others of strongly differing opinions; their goal to stay focused and grounded rather than to get caught in the media hype and damning rhetoric. They said they foresaw a long haul ahead; that there was 'another shoe' yet to drop and that the real work would begin after the election.

The young rabbi, identified by *USA Today* as one of '40 young rabbis to watch' said that her synagogue was training people to conduct 'one on one' conversations much like we did here a few years ago; these are conversations that teach us how to listen deeply to another person and get to their core concerns, issues, and beliefs.

This rabbi was paired with a new congregant of middle age whom she did not know. He said he was participating in the exercise because he and his wife have a close relative who is vehemently opposed to the United States accepting any more immigrants. "I live in a bubble," the man said, "my brother in law's anger was a wake up call, a gift really that helped me realize we simply cannot survive as a fractured society. I asked myself what I was doing to make any difference, to help bring some healing, to help shape a stronger community where I live."

That is moral courage – the willingness to learn how to listen to and reflect upon opinions and experiences that are different and even opposed to our own – without reaching for a political hammer.

Leadership driven by moral courage has released the forces of good that have overcome the forces of darkness at turning points in our national life. Pick any period – the risk to standing up to be heard was high, it demanded deep integrity, action aligned with moral belief not in some vague or general way but in specific, little acts of courage that reshaped personal identities and redirected relationships.

Luther read his bible and invited his community to a town hall meeting; Calvin started a new church; the religious dissidents who settled this nation braved long sea voyages and when they got here figured out what a society with no monarch looked like; Lincoln gathered his enemies on his cabinet so he could better understand the issues; Martin Luther King turn down a lucrative pastorate to heed his call; Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus; and Gloria Steinem now in her eighties leads a global movement for women.

None of them would say what they did came at no cost or without discomfort; but they would say they found themselves at a crossroads and felt they had no choice.

If ever we stood at such crossroads it is now – as a church and nation. The upheaval is so broad and deep and wide I don't think any of us can avoid confronting the choice to pull back or forge ahead.

I hope we forge ahead, not with a blueprint but with a vision to right some wrongs starting with this racially, politically, economically divided city – to do what Zacchaeus did and make amends for the privileges we've enjoyed at others' expense – if that happened at a corporate level among banks, companies, among churches and schools it would transform this city.

We can't 'seek to love' without moral courage. In fact, love without courage is morally vacuous. But if we love with courage at least we can say, like Mitt Romney said he wanted to be able to say to his grandchildren when they look back at this tumultuous time in our history and ask him what he did, at least then we can respond like he can, "I did something. I tried to do what I thought was right." Amen.