

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Do not be corrupt in administering justice; do not render an unjust judgment; do not show partiality to the poor or defer to the great; do not give honor to the great. Judge your neighbor with justice. Judge your neighbor with fairness. Do not go around slandering people. Do not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am *Yahweh*, God.” — Leviticus 19:15-16.

You may have noticed we will be bracketing this service using the hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. The words are by Martin Luther and the melody commonly used is not exactly the same one Luther composed but it is very close to it.

And, as was said at the start of the service, this Sunday is the closest to the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, October 31st, 1517. We commemorate that date because it's said Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg on that date. But most scholars insist the tale has little to do with reality.

However, naming 1517 as the year the Protestant Reformation came to fruition is accurate. It needs to be noted Luther's act was not one of rebellion but the act of a dutiful church member trying to help the church steer a sound, Biblically appropriate course.

The fact that we are now 500 years into this era raises a question about the Protestant Reformation, itself. Does the Reformation seem to us moderns to be “back there,” distant? And, if it is back there, distant, what makes it relevant?

Indeed, is not Christianity, itself, “back there,” distant, some 2,000 years ago? And, if it is, what makes Christianity relevant? On top of that, the Jewish traditions from which Christianity emerges, start some 5,000 years ago. And if those origins were “back there,” distant, what makes any of this relevant? (Slight pause.)

Since we commemorate the Protestant Reformation today, I'll start there. (Slight pause.) Most people probably think the word “protestant” means we, Protestants, are protestant something. But when the word was coined the universal language, one which crossed borders— the *lingua franca*, to use the modern term— was Latin.

In Latin the word ‘Protestant’ comes from: *pro* and *testari*. *Testari* means to witness, to testify, to attest— as in testament. *Pro* means for. Hence, the word ‘protestant’ means that one is witnessing, testifying, attesting for something.

For what are we Protestants witnessing, testifying, attesting? In theory, at least, we witness, testify, attest to God. And we witness, testify, attest to the truth of the Word of God as it is found in Scripture. To the extent that we Protestants are protesting anything, again in theory at least, we protest when the institutional church runs afoul of the will and the Word of God as that Word might be discerned in Scripture.

And, as I indicated, that is exactly what Martin Luther did. The Reformation was not about rebellion. It was about witnessing, testifying, attesting, striving to help the church steer a sound, Biblically appropriate course, discern the will of God.

Put another way, the Reformation was about re-formation. It was about inviting the institutional church to a course correction, based on, as well as it can be discerned, the will and the Word of God. (Slight pause.)

These words are in the Nineteenth Chapter of the work known as Leviticus: “Do not be corrupt in administering justice; do not render an unjust judgment; do not show partiality to the poor *or* defer to the great; do not give honor to the great. Judge your neighbor with justice. Judge your neighbor with fairness. Do not go around slandering people. Do not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am *Yahweh*, God.”

This section of Leviticus is devoted to the holiness code of Israel. Therefore, the first place we need to look is the last sentence. (Quote:) “I am *Yahweh*, God.”

Yahweh, God, is holy. Hence, *Yahweh*, God, has the audacity to say we should not be corrupt, unjust, partial, maintain justice, especially for the poor and outcast, deal fairly all those we encounter, do not slander and do not profit from the blood of your neighbor— tall order.

Why is that a tall order? Tell me, who among us, indeed, in the entire history of humanity, what institution built by humans has treated each individual with the respect they deserve since each of us and all of us are children of God? What individual or institution has escaped from failing, falling short in some way?

So we need to recognize everything in this text concerns neighbor. It is with neighbor that Israel acts out holiness. And since these words make the assertion that *Yahweh*, God, is holy, they, therefore, link *the reality of neighbor to the reality of God*.

Hence, the holiness of God enacted by us must be the justice God seeks on our blue green globe. Israel *and we* have no viable way to be holy except in and through treating each other as holy in and through transformed social relations. (Slight pause.)

Five hundred years since the Reformation— an interesting number. Let’s go back in time for a moment. (Slight pause.)

It is sometimes said the work known as Genesis contains the mythic, establishing stories of Israel. But, based on the details and the context of the story found in Scripture, if such people as Abram and Sari actually existed, the era in which God would have issued a call to them would have been about 2,500 Before the Common Era.

The tale of Joseph, given the details and context of the story, even if it just a mythic, establishing tale, may well have placed Joseph in Egypt around the year 2,000 Before the Common Era. Next, we get a little beyond myth. In whatever form it took, it is likely some kind of Exodus event happened around 1,500 Before the Common Era.

Now we get to some fairly solid numbers. The reign of David happened around the year 1,000 Before the Common Era. And the Babylonian Exile happened just short of the year 500 Before the Common Era.

Scholars say with confidence the Christ was born in what we would call the year 4 Before the Common Era. So, tell me, do you begin to see a 500 year pattern here?

And yes, the Western Roman Empire crumbles in the year 476 of the Common Era, close enough to be seen as yet another 500 year interval.

Next, many people, especially we Westerners, do not even acknowledge this. The Reformation is not the Great Schism of the church. The Great Schism was the split between the Eastern Church and Western Church. And when did that happen? 1054 is the one scholars and historians use, a date which flows right into the 500 year picture.

Now, you have already heard this here today: we date the Protestant Reformation to 1517. And you have already heard this here today: we are, now, 500 years later.

So, you tell me: is it time for another Reformation, another re-formation of the institution we today call church? It does seem to happen, whether by dint of external forces— the Babylonian Exile, the demise of Rome— or by dint of the fact that we, the institution, become so broken that adjustment is in order. Do note: the adjustments due to brokenness tend to come from the bottom up, not the top down. (Slight pause.)

All that brings me back to the ancient words from Leviticus. The truth is institutions are always in need of Reformation, constant re-formation. If that were not the case the words we heard about not being corrupt, unjust, partial, maintaining justice for the poor and outcast, dealing fairly all those we encounter, not slandering and not profiting from the blood of a neighbor would never have been recorded. (Slight pause.)

Well, I want to suggest the word Reformation has a sense of top down in it. I think that's because by labeled it the way we do— Reformation happens in big ways and the very word makes it feel big.

But re-formation is, as I suggested, is bottom up. Now, that poses a serious question for the larger church and for this church. At this start of this 500 year cycle, how will we, the larger church and this church, re-form ourselves? (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest we need to start by very much concentrating on our own behavior. When we see corruption, injustice, partiality, unfair dealing, slander and profit from the blood of a neighbor we need to name it. We need to call it out.

And, if we do think bottom up is the way re-formation really works— as a Congregationalist I certainly think that— we first need to monitor ourselves, our behavior. Then we need to ask ourselves how can we witness, testify, attest to God. How can we witness, testify, attest to the Word of God as it is discerned in Scripture.

And yes, we need to link *the reality of neighbor* to *the reality of God*. Do not misunderstand me. Re-formation happens slowly, one step at a time. But unless we take that first step toward re-formation here at the local church, Reformation will not happen.

And you know what? We *are* due for a Reformation and a re-formation. After all, it's been 500 years. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "I came across a quote from theologian Richard Rhor this week. 'We worshiped Jesus instead of following the same path, made Jesus into a mere religion instead of journeying toward union with God and the children of God. That shift made us a religion of believing and belonging instead of a religion of transformation.' I want to suggest being a follower of the One, Triune God means being re-formed and transformed as we witness, testify and attest to God."

BENEDICTION: God sends us into the world ready and equipped. God is with us each day and every day. We can trust God Whose love is steadfast and sure. Let us commit to doing God's will and God's work. And may God's presence be with us this day and forevermore. Amen.