

Sermon Text for October 27, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Proverbs 3:5-7 and Matthew 15:21-28 *“The church as an agent of reform”*

I have often told you that when Stacy is gone I don't do so well. She went out to see her father and family and of course our oldest Rachel who all live in Seattle or nearby. When I am alone I don't sleep well by myself, things just seem a bit out of sorts, I don't really take care of myself all that great, I stay up later than I need to, I don't eat as well, I just don't take care of myself. One of the evenings when she was gone I turned off the lights to go to bed and I was in my kitchen and heading to the bedroom without realizing that I had left the closet door open, Stacy never leaves the closet door open. As I made my way into the bedroom the side of the door perfectly positioned itself to hit me smack over my left eye.

It hit me so hard that I stumbled a couple of steps back and two thoughts flashed through my mind. One way that it definitely had split my head open and that at any moment, if not already, I was going to start bleeding pretty profusely. The second thought was don't pass out, I felt a bit disoriented and I thought here I am by myself if I pass out there will be no one to give me a hand. Then another thought crept into my mind, do I need a medic alert button to wear around my neck when Stacy leaves for Seattle?

We don't like change, we like our routine, we like what we are used to, we like what we would consider normal and when the abnormal inserts itself, sometimes rudely, we fight against it and we often avoid at all costs any change that might be necessary. This is true in our individual lives, and it is especially true in our church life as well. We are facing some changes in our life, quite a few. Michael Wilson has changed course with his work and he will no longer be our stated clerk but he will be working with the Presbyterian Board of Pensions. The good news for us is that we might just see him more around on Sunday mornings and he might be able to be even more involved in the life of the church. While it is to his and his family benefit and maybe even the benefit to this local church, it comes at a cost for our Presbytery and the local churches in this Presbytery. Change is hard, even if it is necessary and important.

Over 500 years ago marks the date that the Reformation began which changed the way that churches did church and created a movement that today is called Protestantism. That change was very hard and did not come about easy with lives lost and families divided. We are the fruit of that change. This church has seen changes as well, not only in pastoral leadership but also in ways in which we do church, the biggest change came about 4 years ago with the onset of Covid

and our struggle to figure out this new reality that has affected our attendance and our giving. Change is hard for individuals, but they are especially hard for institutions, including, and maybe even especially churches.

Both of our Scriptures define at the center of all that we do is the presence of God in our lives. The only agent and catalyst for change, and the only reason for change that we ought to value is because we have moved away from God's desires and wishes and we are wanting to move closer to him. Let's read.

READ

Since today is Reformation Sunday, a Sunday that we recognize how God made Himself known to us in the reform of the church and continues to make himself known as the church reforms society and culture, I thought it might be helpful to see that there are many ways to do church. Over my time in ministry I have seen church done in a variety of different ways. We lived out church in Italy with attendance in one church if we reached double digits it was a good Sunday. Church is different when you only have a handful of people every Sunday, we experienced that. In Florida it was an institution that was growing and growing from one service to three. In Russia we had a mission church where all of our resources basically went into ministry since we didn't own our own building. Here, again an institution looking to find its way in the community as the heartbeat of Strasburg.

In all of these settings one thing in common that we have found is that church is about living a relationship with each as God relates to us. Church is not about thinking correctly, it is about living life together in a way that builds one another up. Today we will see that the church is an agent of reform only so far as it is able to pursue without ceasing the ultimate goal. This ultimate goal is found in the mission of Christ which is to bring salvation and blessing to humankind universally. The church can choose to either be a part and a facilitator of that goal or be a hinderance to that goal, or it could also find itself somewhere along that continuing. The question we have to ask as a church is are we doing all that we can so that Jesus' mission to bring salvation and blessing to humankind universally is being carried out.

In our reading in the Gospel of Righteousness we find that Jesus goes to a border town to Tyre and Sydon. This is a region that historically has found itself at odds with the people of Israel. If you read Deuteronomy 7:1 you see the enemies of the people of Israel and this region is right in the middle of the enemies, including the woman who comes out and calls to Jesus who is described as a Canaanite. Canaan has historically been the enemy of the people of God.

So, that's important, Jesus approached by someone who is seen as an enemy to his people and his disciples react as you would expect people to react when they are confronted by an enemy, Jesus can you send her away. Jesus seems to agree, twice he seems to shun her, including the last remark that he makes which seems more than ignoring her, it seems more like an insult. I wasn't sent for people like her. It isn't right to give to the dogs what the children, people like us, are supposed to have. I have spent a lot of time discussing Jesus' response and its meaning, this harsh rhetoric which I have been advocating that we refuse to be involved in. So why does Jesus act as if he were someone who was resistant to change and wasn't at all interested in anything that might be considered off script?

Maybe it is because he wanted the glory of God to be revealed as he says about the man born blind. Maybe it is because he wanted to show everyone how God's ultimate goal, that all people come to a saving knowledge of him and receive God's blessings be played out in her. Either way, his response can only be nicely considered as harsh, but it doesn't phase her.

We find here a tenacity of a mother for her daughter. Behind her response is the true concept that Gentiles as well as Jews are fed by God. We see the church in Scripture how both Jews and gentiles are welcomed into the kingdom fully and without barriers. This is what happens with God. Jesus himself says that he was called only to the lost sheep of Israel, but within a single conversation reform takes place because of the faith of a single foreigner. This is how God is willing to work.

For God, reform is not only acceptable but welcomed and embraced, it is even initiated by God. Of course, not all change and not all reform is of God. How do we know which is of God and which is not? I would say that Scripture is the measuring stick to discernment along with prayer and persistent faith as this Canaanite woman shows us. Her great faith that Jesus lifts up is a reflection upon what the church must be built.

This story tells us that it is receptive faith and not physical genetics or national affiliation that determines the blessings of God. We see this in Galatians 3:28 where Paul says clearly that in Christ Jesus there is no longer Jew or Greek, black or white, male or female. He says earlier in vs. 24 that in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. Romans 11 reminds us that it is by grace alone, and not the merit of our faith, that we have been admitted into the ranks of God's salvation historical people. The church is an agent of reform only inasmuch as it is willing to be reformed.

Receptive faith is demonstrated in the church by how much we want to share our faith with others. We often think that just being a part of the church is all that we need, it gives us a pedigree, a status. But here in this Scripture Jesus sets a clear sharp contrast between the believing gentile, this woman who beseeches Jesus to heal her daughter, and the unbelieving Pharisee and scribe even if they do have the pedigree. How much we are willing to share our faith with others is a reflection of the faith that we have.

When we speak about the church as an agent of reform we need to be aware that the church itself needs to be reformed as well. Proverbs 3 reminds us that change can only come by trusting in God for all things. We must be willing to fight for our children while also be willing to offer our children to God so that God can shape and mold as He sees fit. The Canaanite woman falls on her knees before Jesus and worships him even before he has done anything for her daughter, in fact he is giving off signals that he isn't going to do anything for her daughter. She refuses to take no for an answer, her faith is so strong, like that widow who keeps knocking at the door of the judge, until Jesus relents and heals her.

Sometimes the church chooses to that which Jesus did and ignore the needs that are right in front of it. The church can be a difficult place to break in if you don't have a certain pedigree. We have worked hard in this church to make sure that isn't the case, we are on this journey together no matter where we come from because we are all going to the same place together. But if we are to be an agent of reform in the lives of those who are here with us, and in the community around us, it has to start in our own lives. May God bless us as we look to reform our lives built upon a faith in Jesus whose goal it is to bring salvation to all of humanity. Amen.