

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2009
Lessons: Exodus 33:12-20 and Mark 10:46-52

TAKE HEART

In the beginning, reform movements define themselves by contrast with the institution they are reforming, and if they break away, the negatives increase. Protestants spent a long time understanding themselves and developing their churches as not-Catholic. Even in my youth, more than four centuries after Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for church reform, too much of the teaching in our communicants class focused on how we were not-Catholic, which presented two dangers: (1) that we might think we Protestants had it right and those Catholic had it all wrong, and (2) that we would know more about what we did not believe than about what we did believe. The real danger, of course, was contempt.

The time comes when any movement needs to stop defining itself mostly by *what it is not* and go forward with all the positive energy and commitment it can muster to be *what it is* and become *what it is called to be*. More than a few years ago, one of this church's elders and I sat in my study discussing the question of *who and what we are* as a church. At some point, I explained that we are not fundamentalist, not evangelical in the American sense of that term, and not Pentecostal or charismatic. The elder, whom I now miss greatly, thought about those three not's, then asked, "Okay, Dick, but what are we?" I cannot answer that question sufficiently in a sermon. Our entire visioning process has been and continues to be the search for an empowering sense of who we are as a church, where we are in this time and place, and what Jesus Christ calls us to be and to do. I can ask you to think with me about the central, the primary, insistence of the Protestant Reformation and to hear it in positive terms rather than negative. Martin Luther called it, in Latin as was the practice then, *sola gratia*, which means "by grace alone."

Of necessity, both Paul the apostle and Martin Luther the reformer defined grace as not-merit: as love undeserved and forgiveness unearned. Both were fighting to free the gospel of Jesus Christ from institutionalized legalism and from the deadly notion that God loves those who merit God's approval. The opposition, then as now, was the judgmental mentality of reward and punishment. We had the Reformation, but Protestant Christianity has never successfully freed itself for very long from that anti-gospel mentality. Neither those people who judge themselves worthy of God's approval nor those who judge themselves unworthy seem willing to drop it and to leave behind the whole system of approval and disapproval, of reward and punishment. Both cling to their identities as either worthy or unworthy, and neither will let go. The result is that the authoritarian, judgmental

mind-set has continued to dominate Christianity, despite all opposition to it from Paul, Luther, and Jesus himself. Ask yourself where Christianity would be today if it had not so persistently played upon people's feelings of fear, shame, and guilt. Only now, when the old fear tactics have worn out and lost their potency – when fewer and fewer people fear the fires of hell – do we seem perhaps ready to drop them and stop trying to scare or bully people into salvation.

Let me put it as simply and directly as I know how. The message that we are unworthy of God's love is true and sometimes necessary to combat human pride, but it is negative and, therefore, not the main thrust of the gospel, which is, after all, good news. The real message is that God does love us. We have spent so much time and effort hammering people to make them feel unworthy that we have failed to help them or even let them feel loved. Ironically but not surprisingly, pushing people down into the muck of guilt and shame does not, in fact, make them feel more grateful to be forgiven and accepted; it makes them feel guilty and ashamed. So, despite our talk of grace, they continue to see themselves, not only as unworthy, but also as unloved.

Grace is a positive, not a negative. It is God's passionate and, yes, compelling love for the human creatures of flesh and blood, of sweat and tears. Ah, the philosopher objects, but God cannot be compelled; God must be seen as above compulsion, above vulnerability, and even (truth be told) above caring because caring makes one weak. Do you feel the way this kind of talk pushes us back toward seeing God as the dispassionate judge who regards us without love and then hands down reward or punishment? That's not God as the prophets know God or as Jesus brings God to us. God chooses to love and commits to loving us, and yes indeed, that choice makes God willingly vulnerable to us. Love is a strange weakness, because its weakness is the greatest power of all. Love's weakness transforms life, giving us hope and salvation, and it is love's weakness, its willing vulnerability, that we need so we can become the people and the church Christ calls us to be. Let's look now at the way Jesus responds to a person living in a steady state of distress, without relief and without hope.

What happens when a blind beggar keeps calling out to the esteemed teacher? The others watching Jesus pass by try to hush the man, but he persists and will not be silenced. Does he not speak for a weary, troubled world of people whose distresses go unanswered, whose prayers seem to bounce back to them from ceiling or sky, whose lives waste away by the roadside as everything esteemed (including religion) passes them by? Even his name is not his own. Bartimaeus just means "Son of Timaeus." So, yes, he's somebody's son, just as she's somebody's daughter. Aren't we all? Yes, and that's the point. Countless people sit by the side of the road as life, society, and seemingly even God pass them by.

The dialogue in this encounter between the son-of-someone and Jesus strikes me as belonging to much more than that one situation. Hearing the man's persistent outcries, Jesus says to his disciples, "Call him here." Is that not why we are his church? Is that not what he says to us of people in distress, "Call her, call him, here to me"? And the bystanders tell the blind beggar, "Take heart." We like that, don't we? When we're feeling down in the dumps, when life seems stalled out and the way forward blocked, surely faith should say to us, "Take heart!" But we must not stop there. The bystanders complete the summons: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." It not good enough for the man to sit there by roadside feeling gratified that his voice has been heard. "Take heart" is a call to action, not gratification. Get up, move, go to him and hear what he will say to you.

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus asks the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" Is it not obvious what the man needs? He is blind. What else would he need but to see? Yet, Jesus does not ask him what he needs but what he wants done about his condition and his life. Does this man really want to see again, or does he just want to complain about being blind? That's a tough question for any of us. Do I have the will to want what I lack? Can I muster the courage to change what needs changing in my life and in myself? Am I ready to stop cursing my darkness and go toward the light? Or have I become quite comfortable in my discomforts, quite at home in my discontent, quite pleased with my own complaints? "Get up, he's calling you." Indeed, he is. Now, what do I want him to do for me? How much of his life am I willing to share, how far to follow him, how much change to embrace and make my own? Is a promise of heaven when I die enough for me, or am I ready and willing to go forward with him in life and see what God has in mind for me because God loves this world so passionately? Do I really want my eyes opened? These are not fleeting questions but daily challenges to our will to live, grow, and serve. Why are we here? Do we want only a few encouraging words we can enjoy from the roadside without moving, or are we ready to leave our complaints behind and follow Jesus forward into life?

Grace does make excuses for us; it offers healing and change. By grace, Christ waves away pride in my worthiness and shame in my unworthiness alike, and calls me to get up and follow him. It is time to take heart, to find the courage we need and the commitment to back it up. It is time to get up and answer Christ's call. Amen.