

Psalter Reading: Psalm 46

Be Still

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On a spring Saturday broadcast this year of *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor in his “News from Lake Woebegon” made fun of his own denomination as he described the annual conference of the Lutheran Synod up in Minnesota. It seems that every year there are passionate speeches made and resolutions passed on two major issues:

The first issue is an expression of alarm about the deterioration of standards and practices in the church as old and sacred traditions go by the wayside and proposals are made to assure the adherence to the great traditions of Lutheran heritage.

Then a resolution is made every year concerning the lack of young people in the churches and the need to reach out and bring the younger generations into the fold. Of course, Keillor notes, these two concepts are completely contradictory ... as the assembly ... with great gusto and great passion calls for an influx of the young with their new ideas while at the same time stubbornly demanding strict adherence to the traditions of the past.

Each year they are debated and passed ... and each year they accomplish nothing. (NPR, *Prairie Home Companion*, May 30, 2009). Sound familiar?

Makes you wonder, doesn't it ... about how much of our time is taken up doggedly clinging to the past while lamenting the present problems.

There's a quote from Rick Russaw's book, *The Externally Focused Church*, I want to share with you ... maybe to even to stir your imaginations a bit this morning as we heartily celebrate our combination Reformation/Kirkin' Sunday ... think about these questions he poses ... *If your church were to shut its doors and cease to exist, would anyone in your community notice? Would anyone care? Would anyone weep that a place God designated to be a beacon of hope and light has vanished?*

With those questions echoing in our heads ... let us listen with our hearts to our Psalter reading this morning from Psalm 46.

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

10 “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Many years ago in the 16th century, a young priest by the name of Martin Luther had his own debate with the church ... a church that, according to him, had lost its direction . . .and it was time for a change. And so ... on October 31, 1517 in Wittenberg, Luther hammered 95 demands on the front door of All Saints' Church.

According to Luther, the church should not be offering salvation for sale ... the people had the right to hear the Bible read in their own language ... the people did not have to pray to God through a priest ... but had direct access to the Lord. And so ... the Reformation began ... with its foundation resting firmly on:

- *Sola gratia* Grace alone—the only way to be reconciled to God
- *Sola fide* Faith alone—the only means of receiving God's grace
- *Solo Christus* Christ alone—the means of God's saving grace
- *Sola Scriptura* Scripture alone—the infallible authority for belief and ...
- *Soli Deo Gloria* For the glory of God alone—the ultimate purpose for life.

Then a fella, who just happens to be celebrating his 500th birthday this year, John Calvin, influenced by the writings of Luther, writes his famous *Institutes*, which contain the theological heart of what we, as Presbyterians, know as our Reformed tradition.

Now if you think about it ... reformations, by their very nature are loud and noisy and confusing times. Someone is usually demanding change ... someone else wants everything to stay the same. Sometimes swords are rattled ... cannons are even fired ... people are even burned at the stake ... well, at least they used to be.

But even today ... in this time of such uncertainty about the institutional church ... there is the smell of reformation in the air and it's beginning to get noisy again. There are some in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. who I am sure would love to duke it out with other Presbyterians

who disagree with them ... tempers flare up ... words are harsh and biting ... the issues are explosive ... is every single word in the Bible THE very word of God written down on the page or is the Bible the inspired word of God ... is the way to heaven and salvation limited only to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior or do we limit God's will by saying so ... and of course, the issue of the day ... does a person's sexual identity make a difference in who is called or not called by God ...

But these are the issues of today ... the 21st Century church ... and some people say that if we make the wrong choice on any one of these issues ... the church will cease to exist as we know it. Frankly, I'm getting a bit tired of the noise ... and the screaming ... and the yelling.

Like I said ... Reformations are loud and noisy and confusing times ... as well as distracting ... distracting from what we need to be about as practicing disciples and apostles of Jesus Christ. The fact is ... the church has always been in the midst of a reformation ... because as we acknowledge, the church is reforming and always reforming.

I think the psalmist should have added one more point to the psalm ... God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult; ... here's my addition ... *though the church move through Reformation and change.*

But is that such a bad thing? Is Reformation and change something to be feared? Well ... it's easy for me to just say "NO" ... that's the answer I'm obviously looking for. But deep down within each of us ... if we are honest with ourselves ... there is a fear of what change might bring.

Whether you are deeply entrenched in the ways of the church of the 1950s or right up there on the cutting edge of the new emergent church ... each of us carries a desire for a way we want to worship God. And the question becomes ... can we find a middle ground?

Do we worship in a rectangular structure with pews arranged neatly in rows, all of us facing one direction ... or do we circle up the wagons with movable chairs and look at each other as we worship? Do we sing the songs of the ancient church ... the theological heavies ... the *Mighty Fortresses* of long ago ... or do we embrace the songs of a new time and age?

And even when our debates aren't theological ... they are still loud and noisy. Whether you have been in this church for many, many years ... or you are a visitor ... you might not be aware that this church really has gone through many changes over the years.

Columbia Presbyterian Church is not the same church it was when it was organized in 1947 ... it has had to adapt over the years to the many changes in the world around it ... social ... economic ... even cultural and ethnic changes. We used to be a church that was all white ... almost exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. We aren't that way anymore. We've changed ... we've been through a Reformation.

And that's good thing ... because as Kevin Harney points out in his book *Seismic Shifts*, "If the

local church refuses to change, it will die. And, this sad reality is being experienced all over the world. Churches that are stuck in the proverbial rut of sameness eventually find themselves closing their doors and never opening them again.”

I don't find that the case for this church. And on this Reformation Sunday ... I give thanks to God for that. So how do you think we made it all these years? Have we just been lucky ... or have we been clever. I don't think so. Look around ... our doors still open ... our mission to our neighbors and to the world is still vital ... we have wonderful relationships with each other in this church even though we don't all hold the same theological views.

The answer is quite simple ... all you have to do is look back at the words of the psalmist ... “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

“Be still ... and know that I am God!” That is actually my all time favorite verse in the Bible. When my life gets crazy, which it often does ... those words become my mantra ... over and over I repeat them ... because it is not me who's in control ... but God. And when I get a little crazy ... when the world seems to dump too much on my lap ... when I'm sure I can't handle another phone call or interruption ... God tells me to be still.

When I'm faced with complicated problems that demand decisions ... God tells me to be still. And that is precisely how this church has conducted itself through the years. When a group of people wanted to establish a church here at the corner of Kirk and Columbia ... they first became still ... and listened first for God's will and then followed it.

When the session was faced with a demand to close the doors of this church to non-whites ... they first became still ... and listened for God's will and then followed it ... and the doors remained open to everyone.

When the session didn't know what to do with a proposal to open up a day-care center for homeless children on the grounds of the church ... they first became still ... and listened for God's will and then followed it ... and thousands of homeless children have now known the love and compassion of a place we call Our House.

And now ... as a church ... your elders are being still again ... and listening for God's will ... and there is no doubt in my mind that they will follow it. Because change is essential and we've been through it before, remember? So we really don't have to be afraid ... We just have to remember that God is in control, and we can trust God and our elders.”

Out there in the universal church ... there is a new reformation going on ... and here in this particular church ... Columbia Presbyterian Church ... there is a new reformation going on, too. I don't know where it is going to take us ... I don't know for certain where God is leading us ... but if the past is any guide to the future ... I, for one, cannot wait to see what God is going to do here once again in this little part of Decatur, Ga.

Before closing ... I feel the need to remind us that Reformations don't just occur in the church ...

they can also occur in our hearts. So how about you? How about your own life? Are you feeling that you might be at a crossroad? Are you stuck doing some things over and over and over the same old way ... because you fear changing something would be too painful?

Are there relationships in your life that literally drain the life out of you ... are you enabling bad behavior by friends or even family members ... who take advantage of your good nature and love? Maybe you're stuck in a rut ... and find yourself relying more on alcohol ... or drugs ... or other addictions to make it through the day?

Kind of noisy and confusing, isn't it? Then maybe, you, too, need be still and listen for God's will for your life. If you find yourself too scarred to look in the mirror ... if you're too fearful to risk changing something ... then there are people in this world ... disciples of Christ ... who are willing to help you find God's way in your life.

All you have to do is just ask ... that's the first step. I invite you to come and talk to me. I'll help you start the process. And just maybe ... you, too, can begin a Reformation in your life that will fill you with new hope for your future.

We do not exist in isolation. We are disciples ... a community of disciples ... on a journey ... together ... as a discipleship community. And that my friends, is the Good News of Jesus Christ which is at the very heart of a Reformed church.

Let us pray:
God, our help and constant refuge,
Ever present in our need!
Though the earth be ever changing,
Though it fall into the sea,
Rock secure, Ever sure through all tumult ...
You endure.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**