Matthew 5:43-48, Ephesians 2:8-10, Genesis 19:15-23

“Always Reforming, always being reformed”

I just want it to be reflected in the record that it has not snowed in Moscow, Russia, yet this year. Today is Reformation Sunday and it happens to be one of my favorite Sundays just because of the historical background to it. It is a bit difficult to know how much do we talk about the reformation and what happened as a opposed to the reformation and what is going to happen.

The call for the reformation and honestly the Presbyterian Church over time has laid claim to this statement has been: Always reforming while always being reformed. You see, it is a two edged sword. We are, as a church, called to reform the society, culture, and people around us, but we always have to be open to the reformation that has to constantly happen within us as a result of the Holy Spirit.

Today in all three of our Scriptures we would see that it is easier for us to be a church that reforms those around us. IT is much harder, though, to change ourselves and to be a place that is open to God’s movement that demands internal reformation at the personal level and at the institutional or church level. What would a reformation today in the church look like and how could it impact the community around us? I think we will see some hints to that in the Scriptures that we read. Let’s read.

**READ**

I think I have a new local hero in the community. His name is Ron and he is the director at Powerhouse. You know, Powerhouse is a youth center that the churches of this area have put together. It is one of those projects that most communities always talk about doing, but never really get it together and do it. But hey, Strasburg has. It isn’t perfect, but let me tell you on Thursday night I sat in a room with Ron, Susan and about 20 high school kids and he absolutely had their attention. He just asked them one question. If you could ask God any question at all, what would it be? That’s all he asked. And the kids went on and on at such a deep level answering that question. I am always impressed and in awe of people who are able to connect at such a fundamental level with our youth. Another example of a ministry right under our nose and that we support and that people in our church are very directly involved in that probably very few of us know about.

But one constant theme that the kids seemed to keep returning to was this statement that I heard a number of times: Well, at least I know that if I’m good enough God is going to treat me well. If I do enough good things. Now, when you hear that statement as Protestants your hair should raise on end. A big part of what we understand the reformation having done for us is to move us away from believing that we can earn our salvation in any way by what we do and focus primarily on our faith in Jesus Christ.

Historically, the reason why we moved away from our works earning our salvation was Luther. He was living in a time when good deeds were defined by how much money you gave to the church so that your aunt or your brother who had just recently died could get out of purgatory before they took the final plunge toward hell. Good deeds and works were defined not by what you did to help your enemy or even your neighbor, but what you did to help the instituational church or the priests who held all the power.

Jesus’ ministry on earth was one that took the power of salvation away from the institution and gave it right back to where it belonged, to God and His interaction with us personally. Our Matthew Scripture finds itself as the last of the “you have heard but I tell you” statements. Jesus in this chapter tells his disciples you have been taught to do things a certain way, but the way I look at it is: Can you see why Jesus is the ultimate reformer? You were told not to murder, but I tell you don’t even be angry with someone, you were told do not commit adultery, but I tell you even looking at another woman is adultery, and this includes pornography. That is a violation of our wedding vows and a sin tantamount to adultery in Jesus’ eyes in case we were trying to cast it off as no big deal and not really hurting anyone. You were told an eye for an eye, I tell you don’t resist an evil doer, turn your cheek, give them your winter jacket.

Our Scripture today says: you were told to love your neighbor and hate the terrorist, especially those who took 13 of our service men just yesterday. I tell you, remember this is Jesus talking now so don’t get me in trouble for his words, but I tell you we are to find a way to love those terrorist. I can see why people wanted to crucify Jesus.

Jesus took people away from following a set of rules and took people away from business as usual and the status quo to doing the right thing which often went against the grain. He gave people the confidence they needed to trust in your relationship with God. If you look at the end of these Matthew verses he clears up any misconceptions that if we are good then good will reward us in this life. Today, there are those who claim to be reformers and bring a new message, but in reality they are preaching a works salvation that is called the prosperity Gospel.

The name Joel Osteen comes to mind who tells people that if you have enough faith then God will bless you and you will always prosper. Jesus tells us that Christians will lose their jobs and atheists will get promotions. Christians will get cancer and die and atheists will smoke and drink until they are in their 90s. The prosperity Gospel is a pre-reformation throw back that wants to put power in the hands of the few, those preaching, and take it away from God’s providence and grace. It is based on works and it is not what we believe as Protestants.

Jesus tells us that it will rain and shine on the just and the unjust. Everyone on this earth will get what God gives, no exceptions. Nothing more, nothing less. Our faith is what defines us internally and our actions are what defines us externally. If we want to reform and change the world and change the church, then we have to have a personal relationship with Jesus that then has an impact on all that we do.

You know, I had originally planned on stopping in Ephesians on verse 9. But vs. 10 tells us something we cannot forget. As Protestants we should have these verses underlined three times. These are Luther’s verses and these are the verses that gave him the insight that we can be assured of our salvation because it has nothing with what we do, but rather what God has already done for us. But, we have to do something. That is what verse 10 tells us.

Once the pieces of our God’s grace and our faith reaching out to that grace are in place, then, and only then, the reason for our existence and the purpose of our life becomes clear. Why were we created, verse 10 tells us. “He made us for good works to be our way of life.” Once we accept God’s grace then good works has to be our way of life.

This is crucial. Some think that only building our spiritual relationship with God is important. Bible Studies, prayer and fasting, Scripture reading. That is really what counts. Building up the body of Christ. John Updike in his terrible cynicism has one of his characters state: Make no mistake. There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness and good works is nothing.

That is not what Protestants believe. Good works come about as a result of our response to our salvation. They are not a contributing factor to our salvation, but a result of it. They have to be our way of life, after all, that is why God created us.

You may not know but the Presbyterian Church is going through a time of reform itself right now. Much like during Luther’s time it was not a choice it has made to reform, but rather it seems that reform has come to it. Why Sodom and Gomorrah? Well, chronologically as we walk in his footsteps this was the day that we went and floated on the dead sea. It was incredible.

The Dead Sea is also supposedly the place very close to the location of Sodom and Gomorrah. This Scripture in Genesis has long been associated, incorrectly I would add, with the topic of homosexuality. And, it is this topic of homosexuality that is creating the reform, actually, that is creating the division within our denomination. That is the only connection to this Scripture. We are not going to take a very indepth look at this Scripture, but we are going to look at the reform that is taking place in front of us.

I am so thankful that our church here is somewhat protected and insulated from what is happening in our denomination. I like it that way. There is so much work for us to do her both internally within our church and reaching out externally that I am very happy to have others fight those battles that don’t affect the way in which we treat each other and our responsibilities to others.

There are a number of churches that are leaving our denomination over this issue. Luther never left the church that he loved. He was eventually kicked out, but he never asked to leave. He just wanted to change it. I would rather be a thorn in the side producing works through faith than just another fringe group or movement that flares up and then disappears.

God does call each one of us to be reformers, without a doubt. But our reform must come by what we do in our community and by those around us. This week Stacy and I went to the Clinic for Special Children. It was a very significant visit for both of us. Not only the high level of brainpower that is there, I mean the guy is a genius and that is impressive on its own. But the last thing that probably left the greatest impression on me on that visit was when we were about to leave we went to a room on the first floor and there were about 8 or 9 severely handicapped people there. I mean probably the most severely handicapped that I have ever seen in my life.

With them were some young Amish women, or girls, tending to their needs, each one of them was smiling. Mim of course knew them all by name and walked over to them and talked to them just to say hello. You could just see how much they loved and respected her and by her approach you could tell it was completely mutual.

Jesus commands us to reform the society and the church around us. We are called to greet and smile and welcome every person who comes into this sanctuary. It isn’t just John and Cheryl Faltin’s job. Every single person who comes in should know that we love them. The reformation created a new group of people, those who love God unconditionally and act not out of fear for damnation, but out of love and a response to their salvation. Amen.