Jeremiah 31:31-34, Mark 10:46-52

“Is reformation the same as revival?”

In some ways speaking about the reformation can seem a bit pointless when you have a storm bearing down on you, or when a storm of emotions and grief has already hit your community like a tsunami leaving us drained and gasping for air. And it is pointless unless speaking about the reformation can in some way lead us to a renewal of faith in Jesus Christ. I do believe it can do that or else there’s no reason to speak about it.

Last week we mentioned how important it is to try to change the church from the inside out. This is exactly what Luther did. He loved his church, he never wanted to be anything but a principles thorn in the side, until they kicked him out. This Reformation Sunday we celebrate those Christian leaders that went before us to pave the way so that we are able to worship God as we do today.

As we give thanks to our military for their sacrifice which allows us to live in a free nation so the reformers are credited with making the necessary sacrifices so that we could move away from an institutionally based faith to a Christ centered faith that finds its validation and present application in Scripture. We are in this place today because of God moving these women and men of faith. We have to recognize that because it is easily overlooked.

Every week we try to pray for a revival, which we will see is very different from reform. Reform changes us from the inside. Revival changes the lives of those on the outside of these walls to come to love and serve Jesus Christ. These two concepts are very different but what we will see is that we cannot be a part of a revival if we do not embrace a reform within our church here in Strasburg that is centered around faith.

The two Scriptures that we are going to look at today center on these two topics of reform and revival. We will see that Jeremiah will cover Reform and Mark will cover revival. Now, for the next couple of months you are going to be totally out of your element because we aren’t getting back to our John Scriptures until after the New Year. We have today, then the election, then Stewardship Sunday, Thanksgiving, Advent and then the year is over. So, get ready for a different type of ride over these next few weeks.

**READ**

In the evening of October 31 1517, 495 years ago, an Augustinian German monk following the tradition of the Wittenberg Cathedral posted his 95 thesis on its doors which stated his objections to the current practices and theology of the church of Rome. It began a movement that would spread across the world and in time spawn Protestant Churches worldwide. Today, the Protestant church with all of its different manifestations is the largest group of believers in the world.

But the theology and the beliefs of this reform were centered on understandings that we take for granted on a daily basis. But back nearly 500 years ago they were revolutionary. Some off that theology is reflected in Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that is not written on stone tablets, or even in a book, but rather on the hearts of all people. The concept that we are able to have a personal relationship with our creator and our Savior Jesus Christ without the church interfering is as mind blowing as the iphone 5 having a jack on the bottom. No, it really was revolutionary.

This allowed individuals to move away from the law written and interpreted by the church to one of a relationship and trust with God Himself. No longer were we saved by our sacrifices of time, money, sweat, influence, but rather we are saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8 is our underline verse for the day, because it is the calling card of the Reformation which was revolutionary in its time, but taken way too much for granted by us today. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

You see Jeremiah speaks about this salvation. We said last week that faith is a gift from God. Look at vs. 33 of Jeremiah, god will personally put his law in us, write it on our hearts. In Jesus Christ that new covenant is realized and our hearts have been etched by his sacrifice. It is a very clear moving away from legalism to freedom in Christ. A moving away from the institution and its policies being the Gospel to the Word of God being that which is a light unto our feet, all of our feet, so that we can see the resurrected Christ and receive that Grace. That’s another revolutionary concept. That all of us are allowed to read the Bible and interpret it ourselves. Of course, how else would it be? Well, how about if I just told you what to think in regards to the Bible and what it says and you have to follow everything I say. Any other way was unthinkable.

These revolutionary concepts have provided a freedom for Christians that were unthinkable years ago. But there remains today a seesaw between legalism and freedom in churches. Many of us have forgotten the lessons of the reformation and still rely upon the laws of the church as opposed to the freedom of Christ. It continues to be a needed reform from time to time as communities shift to the comfort and safety of rules and laws because then you know if you’re right or wrong. Don’t leave it up to us preacher, tell us what we are supposed to think. Anything else is an abnegation of your leadership. Isn’t that what a good pastor does, tell you what you need to believe? But Jeremiah tells us that the day will come, and with Jesus’ presence in our lives it has already come family, when a reform will take place within the people of God, within the bride of Christ, the Church where the law is known already because it is written on our hearts. We will not be judged by how we keep the law, but rather how our relationship is with the one who wrote the law on our hearts.

How does this pre-reformation legalism take place within churches today? It manifests itself with judgments being made in churches about other churches because they celebrate holidays that they shouldn’t, such as Halloween. You see it when judgments are made about people who go to church and go to bars, or smoke, or chew, or go with girls who do. This then leads us to a complacent thought that if I have a long enough quiet time, go to church every week, tithe faithfully, be nice to my neighbor, then I’ve checked the boxes and I’m good to go. Legalism in the 21st century manifests itself as moralistic superiority because we are the only ones who worship the right way, or live the right way, or love Jesus more than you.

We don’t need the church to tell us that not to watch porn as a hobby, or not to cheat on our taxes, or look for greedy gain that will harm countless others around us. Jeremiah tells us that when God has written his laws upon our hearts, we should know it. We shouldn’t have to be told that taking innocent life is wrong, or that closing our doors to strangers is wrong. We don’t need to be taught certain things. It is written on our hearts.

But we don’t always see it. A reformation within the church takes us where our desires are God’s desires. I Peter 4:2 tells us that we are to arm ourselves with Christ “so as to live for the rest of our earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.” Or even better yet we find in Romans 12:2 where Paul tells us: “Do not conform to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is- his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”

That will off God ought to be what motivates all of our actions, just do that which you know is right. If that is not our motivation to begin with, doing what we know God’s desire for our life is, then no amount of rules will make you want to love, serve, and worship the Savior in your life.

From the inside, those of us within the church love to be able to read the writing on our hearts. We could have been a member of this church for years but if Jesus is only a name and not a person that we love and follow, then our faith is useless. You see faith is a muscle that has to be exercised so that it can move mountains. If not, then it will atrophy and shrivel up and die and no amount of good works we do can make us right with God or heal our weak faith.

That takes us to revival. Turn to Mark and let’s look at the healing of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus means literally son, or Bar, of Timaeus. Timaeus means literally unclean so his name is Son of the unclean. Right from the beginning we see that he isn’t one of us, he isn’t part of the community, he is an outsider, not part of the gang. Jesus is surrounded by a crowd of people as they make their last stop before Jerusalem, which is Jericho that is about 15 miles from Jerusalem. It is a perfect place for the indigent to ask for money because the pilgrim should be in a good mood as the end is in sight.

Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is passing by so he calls out to him loudly, Jesus, have mercy on me. The disciples as they pass by try to keep this beggar sitting on the side of the road as the crowds pass by to be quiet. You know, disciples have a way of doing that, trying to silence outsiders because Jesus is too important to deal with anyone except those that he really likes. They did the same thing in this chapter with the young parents as they were bringing their kids to Jesus to be blessed. They tried to shoo them away and keep them quiet. We do have a bad habit at times trying to keep outsiders outside of these walls, but we are working on that aren’t we? We don’t need this space to ourselves, we can share it with those who don’t know the Gospel.

But this doesn’t phase Bartimaeus. He just gets louder, he didn’t even pay attention. You know, it may not seem like it, but society is telling us louder than ever that they need us. The recent Pew Poll that showed that 20% of people in the United States have no religious affiliation is a cry from the society that is telling us that we don’t see a reform in the church so we are going straight to Christ. That is what accounts for the movement away from main stream Protestantism because we are seen as institutional and cumbersome and somehow not able to give what people need to experience the living Christ. Society is telling us louder and louder that they really need a reformed church that cares about relationships, a church that cares more about them than about the laws of the church and the status quo. On Thursday we will be having a community wide service for Isaiah and the Mennonite Church will be filled with kids and adults who probably very rarely have stepped into any church.

But they will come and that will be a cry that says we need you. Have mercy on us. We don’t know what to do. Help us understand how this happens. Help me see those words etched upon my heart. Help me to embrace the love that Jesus has for us. Society cries out to us louder and louder and we try to silence it by saying be good, follow the rules, clean yourself up before you can come in here.

Bartimeus is told that Jesus heard him so he throws off his cloak and rushes, stumbles, gropes his way over to the Savior. He let’s go of the only that he owns that has any value. He gets to Jesus and Jesus asks him: What would you want me to do for you? You know earlier in this chapter he asks two of his disciples this question and they respond with a request for power, let us sit at your right hand. Jesus asks a complete outsider and he says: I just want to see again, that’s all I want.

Jesus heals him and Bartimaeus follows along the way. Jesus is able to identify the faith of an outsider that is about to be quenched by the insiders. A revival allows the message and person of Jesus to set free the sinner who is an outsider.

We find ourselves here at FPC in a bit of a reformation. I hope we are reading Scripture more. I think that has a lot to do with it, I pray that it does. We need to pray more individually and together, that’s our next project. But something is allowing us as his disciples to walk closer with Him. Some walls may still have to come down, but I think we may be done crawling now, and just might be beginning to walk.

Our next step is to not be afraid of a revival outside of these walls stirring up in the community. The reformation within this church should transform us and renew our minds to reach others. In December we will begin an each one reach one campaign where you will be challenged, each one of you, to bring one person to church during Advent before the New Year. I’ll ask you to introduce them to the church. They can’t be going to any other church.

That will then give us the practice that we need to go into the community and share the Good news in a very different way. Not others coming to us, but us coming to them. May God bless us and keep us as we look to have a reform here at First Presbyterian that will pave the way for a revival here in our community. Amen.