

**"ECCLESIA REFORMATA
SED SEMPER REFORMANDA"
or
"A Little Lesson in Latin"
October 25, 2015**

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Gospel: Mark 10:46-52

The Sermon:

Are you stocking up on candy? The day of “Trick or Treat” is fast upon us. We had about 20 “trick or treaters” last year. At my son’s house, my daughter-in-law, Alex, is the Queen of Halloween. Their House is like a magnet in the neighborhood. I asked Craig “How many?” he said, “About a 135 or so.”

As Halloween approaches, many plan their costume parties, trick-or-treating, pumpkin carving and haunted houses. Ghosts and ghouls are a reminder of the day's origins in ancient Celtic history; when Oct. 31 was the night when the dead returned to earth.

Here’s a fun fact: Did you know Halloween also played a pivotal role in the Reformation? But we’ll get to that.

First, I want to reflect a bit on institutions. Already I can hear your thinking, “What a dull song this will be!”

Today we celebrate the Protestant Church. There is nothing like it in the world! It amazes and inspires; it also aggravates, angers, confounds, confuses, annoys and totally ticks-us-off. In it, there is so much of the best and worst that it boggles the mind.

And of course, it's not just one institution, there is a whole galaxy: big stars, flashing meteorites, planets and their moons. We call them denominations. Even as we speak those historic denominations are imploding into a million parts. In the last two years, the Methodist Church has lost 6,000 congregations.

Is it any wonder that Young adults are not much into the church? They distrust it as a by-gone product of the Jurassic age. Ineffectual – like a blob of mush; hit it, punch it, use your spoon to play with it, and back it settles into the bowl, just like it was.

I read about one institution that is the perfect metaphor.

Meredith Platt tells of riding Amtrak one night from Baltimore to New York City, the very night when we “fall back” from Daylight Savings time.

“As our sleek Amtrak coach hurled through the night, we had no inkling of the extraordinary experience that lay ahead.

“You see, Amtrak takes very seriously our annual ritual called The Turning of The Clock. At precisely 2:00 AM, all over the country, Amtrak trains hit the air brakes, pull over, stop, and nestle down. For one hour, thousands of passengers and crew wait silently while Daylight Savings Time becomes Standard.

“We all “fell back” together. Why had Amtrak not told us? Why no special sign in Pennsylvania Station saying we'll have an extra hour on the train for the same price?”

[New York Times - 11/17/84]

II.

A metaphor for the church??? pulled over on the track, going nowhere, waiting out the time.

But not me! I confess I'm not objective about the Church.

A teenager, I cannot imagine my high school years apart from the church - how it helped this confused kid through adolescent!

I was educated in a college that began with the church. The chaplain of that college, Dr. Frank Josselyn, was my salvation as a person.

Diane and I were married in the church 61 years ago by that gracious man.

He was the guide through the jungle of becoming a minister, helping me navigate that weird institution called Los Angeles Presbytery.

My life has been informed - and transformed - by this institution. I meet Jesus Christ through the ministry of the church!

III.

On the other hand, bogus institutions pollute our planet ... and our minds as well. The House of Representatives, after a 23 day halt, now returns to provide material for late-night comics. Christian nationalism has become a pollution to the faith.

To be sure, the church has created our share of messes. Here's an iron-clad guarantee: that will continue. But the church also has stood when no one else would stand. It has cradled learning. The church has preserved and supported the arts which bless our lives; a reservoir of good.

It is the church that birthed the Bible: that wrote it, collected it, preserved it; the church that brings it to us for our growing good.

Not perfect, to be sure, but I see the church is the most promising organization on the face of the earth.

I know I can walk past any church and chances are overwhelming that should I go in I will find a person - genuine and true - who labors there in Christ's name.

IV.

Today is Reformation Sunday and we celebrate this mixed-bag institution. Today, we honor our Protestant Heritage and we do it because of something that happened on October 31st, in the year 1517.

It was All Hallows Eve, the day before All Saint's Day. An obscure monk in the unknown town of Wittenberg, Germany, pounds some tacks into the church door and posts his "Ninety-Five Thesis" - statements for discussion and debate.

Our Trustees would wince and growl at that assault on our lovely front doors. But in Luther's time it was like hitting "send" on your email: this was the town's bulletin board.

Brother Martin was looking for a scholarly discussion. He knew the next day - All Saint's Day - would be a high attendance day. Much to his amazement, spontaneous combustion erupted; embers fanned into flames, the whole of Europe was ripe for reformation.

V.

Well, that was a few years ago. Today, we remember Martin Luther, John Calvin of Geneva, John Knox of Scotland. And we thank them for their energy, imagination, their fervor; we laud their vision and perseverance, and we also deal with their many faults, because we all have them.

They brought to life the watchword of the Reformation; the Latin in our sermon title. Feel free to pick up your bulletin and just repeat after me:

"Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda."
"The Church reformed - but always reforming."

“The Church reformed” – that means the house needs cleaning.
“But always reforming...?” That suggests the job is never done.

Does this mean we’ll always have to be about this cleaning? Checking what we are doing and why? The best practice is to use the best of the past to move into the future.

VI.

This dynamic correlation of past and future gets played out in the Bible all the time.

In our gospel lesson, poor blind Bartimaeus was a sorry sight. Sitting by the road side. You know the blind were considered sinners. Why else would God inflict this on them but that they done bad?

He sits in the dust outside of Jericho. Dust and darkness. That's what his life is. He longs to see again. He remembers days gone by, bright colors and sunny days and faces.

Bartimaeus has heard people speak about Jesus, this man from Galilee who has been traveling in the area, making his way to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus has heard that this Jesus speaks about religion in a new way. He speaks about love and forgiveness and compassion. He brings healing and hope and wholeness. His words and his touch make people well.

So here is a man with a need for renewal; he calls out, he will not be discarded, and there is no shutting him up. The scene is dramatic. He leaps up, throws off his cloak, and comes to Jesus, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Mark has a message for us larger than a healing. Bartimaeus does not go on his way. The man who now sees clearly, instead goes the way of Jesus - “In that very instant he recovered his sight and followed Jesus down the road.”

The reformation was never seen as “a done deal.” Life is never really achieved, it is always experienced as a pilgrimage, a journey; just like Bartimaeus, we are going down the road with Jesus.

VII.

This morning, I want to affirm the church as we move toward the future.

This ministry of witness: speaking, living, singing, dancing, sharing the wonder and the marvel of God's gift of New Life in Jesus Christ.

This ministry of serving: working and organizing, saving, giving, participating in

Christ's task of binding up this wounded world.

This ministry of forgiving: caring and praying, listening and hearing, staying open, seeing the light in Christ where everyone else sees only dark, loving each other back again into New Life

Is there reformation in store for Babcock? I must tell you, I deeply believe there is! Not just paint or carpet, building or grounds, but a new spirit of being church.

The reformation never ends and God is not finished with us yet.