

Sermon for Oct. 27, 2019, Reformation Sunday  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church  
Phil. 2: 1-5; 14-16; Luke 18: 9-14  
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

*Lord God, be in these words and send your Spirit to open our hearts to them. Amen.*

### Always Reforming

If Martin Luther could have foreseen the religious and political upheaval that followed the nailing of his 95 theses to that church door in Wittenberg, Germany, would he still have done it? Although he miraculously escaped being martyred for accusing the Roman Catholic Church of abuses, hundreds of thousands of people did not. Burnings at the stake, beheadings, hangings, tortures of every sort, family divisions, and religious wars followed that one single action on October 31, 1517. Good and faithful people on both sides of that great divide gave their lives for their personal beliefs in who God was to them. Our existence as Reformed Protestants came at a great price, one in which we ought not gloat, but give both humble gratitude and make confession for the body of Christ, broken for us.

The body of Christ continued to be broken as Protestantism itself immediately began to fracture into the Lutherans, the Calvinists, and the Anabaptists, among others. A Google check on how many different Christian denominations exist today shows that no one can agree to a specific number, other than that there are thousands. Even as far back as the Council of Jerusalem, right after Jesus' ascension, the apostles disagreed about what credentials one needed to be called a follower of Jesus Christ who said, "Make my joy complete by being one."

Jesus was fairly clear on what one needed to do to be a follower: believe in him, and love God, others, and self. That was it. How did we get so far off base? What happened to the unity that Jesus called for? People happened. People with their own judgments and biases and agendas and rules concerning who was in, and who was out. We still do that today. We still break the body of Christ, and so, for me at least, Reformation Sunday is not so much a celebration of breaking free from the Roman Catholic Church as it is a time to look at our own personal reformation, at what we need to be doing to clean up the abuses in our own lives, in order to, as Paul wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

Poor Pharisees. Jesus' parables never ended well for them. While we may have guessed the outcome of this familiar parable from its beginning, no doubt the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking in that crowd one day long ago did not. No doubt those Pharisees

were quite offended and perhaps were even part of the crowd watching Jesus' crucifixion just five chapters later as Jesus, once again, turns expectation on its head.

So who were the Pharisees? Were they "bad" people? No. The Pharisees were similar in role to that of elders and Sunday School teachers. They knew the laws of Moses backwards and forwards, and they were the perceived spiritual leaders of the people. Though they did not have the priestly lineage or wealth of the Sadducees, the Pharisees were often the most vocal and influential leaders who kept a very watchful eye on their flocks. The name *Pharisee* in its Hebrew form means *the separated ones*. They were "not like" the sinners. Yet, by Jesus' time, they had made themselves the most bitter, and deadly, opponents of Jesus Christ and his message of love and reconciliation.

The Pharisees intended to obey God, but eventually they became so devoted to The Law that they became extremists, assuming the role of insuring that everyone toed the official religious line the way *they* thought it ought to be toed. When Jesus didn't follow suit, he threatened them. They saw his miracles, they heard his words, and they hardened their hearts and held tightly to their own views and judgments. If other people couldn't be "like them," then those other people were wrong.

One of my female colleagues told me that in seminary, her assignment was to rewrite this story, using contemporary characters. After all, what do we really know about Pharisees and tax collectors? In her revision, she used a member of the Presbyterian Women and an unwed mother in place of our better-known characters. The Presbyterian woman went to worship and thanked God for her fine clothes and home, her social upbringing, her longtime marriage to a CEO of a local firm, her knowledge of scripture, and she reminded God that she did, in fact, attend every fellowship function, worship regularly, raise money for the children in the orphanage, and occasionally clean out the church refrigerator. If she had any reason to ask for forgiveness, she couldn't, at that moment, think of it. She was not, thankfully, like that "other" person.

The unwed mother, on the other hand, sitting in the back corner of the church, begged God to look after her children, to safe-guard her third shift factory job so that she could put food on the table and buy her children's school supplies. She apologized that she couldn't attend the fellowship events or make Bible Study because at those times she was tending her ill mother who had no other resources. She asked to be able to forgive the men who abused her and the deadbeat father of her children, and she asked God to please open another door for her, but until that happened, to forgive her for what she had to do to survive.

So who went home justified?

My friend's assignment got me thinking about what contemporaries I might place in this parable of two people praying before God. A Republican and a Democrat? A Democrat

and a Republican? A person who is married and a person who is homosexual? A dedicated church elder and a Christmas/Easter only member? An employed white American and an undocumented Hispanic? A Sacs Fifth Avenue consumer and a shopper from Walmart? A Catholic and a Protestant? A Protestant and a Catholic? A Christian and an Islamic? You and me? It is so easy to fall into the sin of judging others, and it is so harmful to ourselves and to the unity of the body of Christ. As Jesus taught, “Take care of the log in your own eye before you worry about the speck in someone else’s.” Such simple words, yet so hard to practice, especially when we don’t understand why others won’t be like us.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

Same God. Same temple. Same religion. Two children of God. What happened? The Pharisee *objectified* his brother: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—especially that tax collector over there.” God, I thank you that I am not like that lazy bum asking for a handout in the parking lot. God, I thank you that I am not like that fat woman at McDonald’s who just ordered a Big Mac and fries. God, I thank you that I am not like that liberal flag-burner. God, I thank you that I am not like that person with the Confederate flag in his yard. God, I thank you that I am not like that woman with five children who abuses welfare. God, I thank you that I am not like my brother or sister who doesn’t pray as much as I do, attend church like I do, give time like I do, work hard like I do, contribute like I do, worship like I do. God, I thank you that I am not like.

Not like. Separation. Judgment. Enmity. Bitterness. Poison. Sin. Jesus did not come to make new laws. His righteousness does not depend on moral intention. He came as a radical to offer a radical new way of living, from a heart that reflects the loving heart of God. Jesus makes clear in this brief story that it is the tax collector who is blessed and shown mercy because of his humility, not his self-righteousness, and his reliance not on himself, but on the grace of God. Paul reminds us of that importance: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in *humility* regard others as better than yourselves.” Humility is where our true reformation begins.

What we tend to forget is that what unites us, what makes us family, is not our shared Reformed doctrine, not our *Book of Order*, not our Presbyterian theology, not our agreement on worship style, not how alike we are. What unites us is our *sinfulness*, our brokenness, and our utter reliance on the grace of Jesus Christ. In God’s eyes, we are equals because we all stand in need of his love and mercy.

It doesn’t matter to God who has more money.  
It doesn’t matter to God who gives more in time or talent.  
It doesn’t matter to God who shows up for fellowship events.  
It doesn’t matter to God who prefers what kind of worship.

It doesn't matter to God what time we choose for Christmas Eve worship or whether we have an Advent program.

It doesn't even matter to God if we, like the Pharisees, faithfully attend worship and study if those practices do not change our hearts.

Nothing that we "do" for God matters if we do not remember our mutual need for his grace, and if we do not extend that same grace to others. The Pharisee missed that fact. God is in the judgment business; we are in the witness business.

"Jesus told this parable to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." People of God, this parable is addressed to we who worship the same God, go to the same church, share the same faith and yet who sometimes forget that our call as believers is to practice and demonstrate charity and unity, not judgment. Only God knows each person's heart. Only God knows why another person doesn't live his or her life the way we think they ought to. Only God knows because only God needs to know.

So, if our role as forgiven sinners isn't to judge, like the Pharisee, then what can we do as *Reformed* Christians to strengthen this Body of Christ as it moves forward? We remember that we are called to shine like stars in a dark and broken world. Most of all, we rejoice that Jesus loves us, and through the gift of his word, he continues to remind us that we are made to be re-formed again and again, as God sees fit, through love. In that reformation, we rejoice.