

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

October 26, 2008
Reformation Sunday

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

¹Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? ⁴⁵If David thus calls him

Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

"The Present Tense of Reformation"

I think the oak tree in my front yard knows me. I know how ridiculous that sounds, but I think my oak tree somehow knows me. The oak tree in my neighbor's yard—and they are both trees of the same variety—the oak tree in my neighbor's yard has lost the vast majority of its leaves. They are on the ground. Brown, crunchy, and lifeless they lay there on the ground blowing away as the wind swoops.

The leaves on the oak tree in my yard are turning. But a cursory look reveals that most of the leaves are still more green than any color, and while a few leaves have dropped, the vast majority are in tack. I think the tree knows me, and understands the reality that deep within me I am not ready to let go of summer yet. I just am not ready. I want it still to be summer. When I did the laundry I put the jeans shorts on the top of the folded pile of jeans—the long pants versions go on the bottom of the pile. Hey, its still summery—isn't it a little bit? Maybe, at least I hope so.

I'm not letting go of summer. I never did get to the beach. I never did get in the pool. I never did build that deck or paint the outside trim. Thank you oak tree for being on my side—summer is not done.

Moses was done. You remember this great leader of all leaders. He had been tending the sheep of his Father-in-law, Jethro, when he saw the burning on the mountain that beckoned him. Remove your shoes you are on holy ground, burning bush, and voice that calls out to him, "You will deliver my people."

With fear and trembling he goes back to Egypt. Plagues later, Red Sea opened and closed, manna in the morning, quails in the evening, no

water at Rehidim, and golden calf later—here is Moses with the decades of wilderness wandering behind him. There is Moses at the pinnacle of yet another mountain—this time it is mount Nebo and the top of Pisgah.

And here Moses looks out, and behold the Lord allows him to see it. The Promised Land—fully before him. There it is across the valley and over the river’s pass—there it is in the distance. The land of promise, the land of plenty and more, oh, there it was the very land that been foretold and longed for lo these decades.

Ah, he sees it—with his tired old eyes at 120 years we told that his sight had not diminished and his vigor had not yet abated. He sees the Promised Land. He will not walk there. His feet will not touch the soil. But he does see it before he attains his glory there atop Pisgah.

Martin Luther, on the night of October 31, 1517, nailed 95 theses the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany, signaling the beginning of what became known as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther chose this night knowing that many people would be attending church the next day—All Saint’s Day—and would thus read his statements of concern about the church.

Together, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, along with Knox and Bullinger brought on the Reformation of the church and that great tradition of the Reformed Tradition grew into the heritage we claim as Presbyterians as part of the Great Church—the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Not a single of those great Reformers set out to start a new church—they did rather—protest the state of being in the institution of the church as they understood it. The result was a different iteration of church that

carried with it the apostolic tradition of being founded on that which had been passed on—namely the Word of God—Scripture and the sovereignty of God.

From these great commitments we have garnered the Genevan work of Calvin in his “Institutes” and Knox’s form of Government still reflected in the founding principle of church order that we hold dear as Presbyterians. The watchwords of those great Reformers came be “*etclasia et reformata, etclasia et reformanda*”—the church reformed and always reforming.

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It is as radical today as it was then.

It was radical then. He was radical then. Jesus is still radical now.

A lawyer. Yes, a lawyer. I have two in my family. They like to be real precise. They like to pick at the meaning of each particular word. They like to know what the details are. They pay attention to such things.

A lawyer stands up to question Jesus. And be clear here. It was a test—of the 600 hundred plus laws would Jesus give the right answer? Which one commandment is the greatest? Which one commandment is the most significant of all of them? Jesus answers clearly and quickly. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment and a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

Jesus does not just answer his question of which one commandment is the greatest, but gives him more—*“the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

It is so simple isn't it? It is what we teach children. Love God. Love each other. Love God. Love your neighbor. That is all of it. It is the whole.

Indeed it is. But, however, hold the phone, wait a minute, stop—this is not the way the world works. The world works far more on the basis of: “You get me, I’ll get you.” “You do that to me, well buddy someday you’ll get yours.” Or in the immortal word of Jackie Gleason, “some day Alice. Some day, pow right in the kisser.”

The world works more like rewards and punishments. “If you...(fill in the blank), then I’ll (fill in the blank).” You know it. You know how it works, “One hand washes the other.” “Blood is thicker than water.” “An eye for an eye.”

We do not even need to recall any more of these phrases we know how it is the world works. We are both in the world, and I dare say of it. We tend to orient our lives on rewards and punishments. Even to the point that we think, maybe not even consciously, the more good we do the more reward we should get. The better we are the more entitled we are.

You see, I think it is a matter of tense. That’s right—one of those first grammar lessons that teach in elementary school has to do with tense. I think the world way has to do with the past tense. Past happenings are the focus. I did this or that. Because this or that has happened the result has been. The tense of the world is a past tense.

We have what we have. We are what we are because of what has taken place.

Here is where Jesus is the radical Jesus. His tense is not past tense, but present tense. The question is not how did we get here? The question becomes, what are you going to do now that you are here? What are you doing now? What will you do with your life?

What now?

You shall love the Lord your God with your whole mind, and with your whole heart, and with your whole strength. You shall love you neighbor as yourself.

Right now. Not when your neighbor does something worthy of your love. That is too late. Right now. Not when your neighbor acts in love towards you. That is too late. Right now. Not when your neighbor stops doing that which you cannot stand. That is too late. Right now. Not when your neighbor stops ticking your off. That is too late. Right now.

Right now. Present tense.

The church reformed and always reforming. We tend to live our lives more in the church of the church reformed and that's it, don't touch it, all is finished. Unless this church is different from your neighbor's church—we tend to like things the way that we like them. We tend to like the church to be such that it pleases us and meets our needs.

You know what that church is—it is the church of the “have it my way.” We like that church. We find it comfortable. We find it – well all about us.

Hardly the church of Jesus Christ. Certainly not the way the great reformers saw it. They understood the church to be that which needed to be formed, and re-formed. That which needed to be shaped, and then re-shaped, and then re-shaped again, and again, and again. A constant process of re-shaping and reforming.

Why? Because they got it that it is not about hanging onto the past, but it is about being a part of what God is doing in the world. Present tense, not past tense.

That is the reform in our church that we need. It is not that we should forget our past or even neglect it. No, I honor where we have been as church and I am now old enough that I too look back to the glory days of yesteryear. When that becomes our vision of how the church should be in the today or in the future, then we have ceased to be the church that is being re-formed by the missio dei –the mission of God in the world.

What has happened is that we have been living our lives out of preservation. That is not enough. We are being called to an incredible moment in our history. We can no longer convince ourselves that this is a Christian nation, a Christian society, a Christian culture, or even a Christian community. And there is doubt that it ever was.

If this community is to learn about the love of God—it will only come if we tell it and show it. With BRAC happening there will be more people in our community. As it stands today over 80% of Harford County is not involved in the worship of the Triune God this morning.

If this community is to learn about the love of God—it will only come if we tell it and show it. It will only happen as we re-form. Such a reformation today is a re-orientation of our view. We need to move the question from what is happening in our church to what is happening outside it. We need to move our vision from looking in at the institution to looking out at our communities.

And as we do that what we are really doing is moving our focus from us to what God is doing in the world and in this community. We become part of the missio-dei---we become part of that which God is doing in the world.

It is a movement from past tense to present tense. It is a movement to loving God by loving the world God created. It is a movement to loving God by loving the ones that God loves—our neighbors.

I remember so many times reading this great story of Moses and feeling bad that his feet never crossed over into the Promised Land. And all the while I missed the wonder of the story. There is this great detail recorded in the story about it.

For the Lord allows Moses to see from the vantage point of Mount Nebo and the top of Pisgah the whole of the Promised Land. God allows Moses to see the whole thing. It is God saying to Moses, in essence, “See my servant, see what I, the Lord your God, am doing. See it Moses, see it.”

What a gift that God gave to Moses as he passes on to his glory.

Moses gets to see what God is doing.

It is time. It is time for leaves of my oak to turn and drop. It is time for me to let go of the summer. It is time for me to move on and stop mourning what I think I lost and did not get.

It is time for me to stop living past tense—the summer is gone.

It is time—it is time for me to start seeing the wonder of the now.

Oh church, oh wonderful church, here in Harford County. Oh people of God, it is time for us to live in the present tense. It is time for us to be a part of what God is going to do and is already doing in the now.

May the Spirit so breath on us that we will be formed into ones that live present tense! May the Spirit so breathe on us that we will be formed as the ones who love now—not just us in here—but those out there. For

**that is where God is—out there at work in the world. Will we so go—Re-
Formed?**

Amen.