

*Semper Reformanda*

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: John 8:31-36

I want to draw a picture from memory, a memory that remains vivid despite the passing of many years. The scene was Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, and the setting was the Eighth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Zimbabwe had just begun its spiral down from its status as one of Africa's more prosperous countries—it was once called “the breadbasket of Africa”—to the economic and political disaster zone it has since become. Zimbabwe's leader, Robert Mugabe, once known and celebrated throughout the continent as a leader in the African struggle for liberation from colonialism, was already displaying symptoms of the kind of megalomania that would lead him to try to silence all voices of opposition in his country, and to beat into submission, and I mean that literally, anyone he considered to be a threat to the social order and his continued rule.

The persecution had begun with the criminalization of homosexuality. Gay people were thrown into prison, or were beaten by mobs while the police looked on apathetically. The only opposition to this policy came from scattered voices in the churches and from international human rights organizations. Mugabe later moved on to other targets: white farmers, and black politicians who dared to criticize his behavior, but he began with the most vulnerable group, the most easily misunderstood group in Zimbabwe's society. The presence in Zimbabwe of people attending the World Council of Churches' General Assembly occasioned a pause in this persecution, but it resumed in all its fury soon after we left. In fact it intensified.

During that Assembly, with its background of foreboding and the impending collapse of Zimbabwe's economy and its social order, delegates and guests from our United Church of Christ and the Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ) as well as from the United Church of Canada were invited one evening to a worship service and meal at a local church that was part of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe. We arrived in buses, and were literally applauded into the church sanctuary by lines of church members who were waiting when we arrived and began singing to us as we got off our buses. This was a welcome without restraint, and there was sheer joy in the expressions on the faces of those who were receiving us.

During the worship service, after we had been treated to some absolutely wonderful African hymn-singing, which we had weakly reciprocated by our less exuberant singing of some of the African hymns we knew, an elder of the church, a man of great dignity, probably in his 80's, rose and announced that he wanted to pay special tribute to the guests from his church's partner churches in America. He proceeded to recite, in a wonderful African/British accent and without error, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. At the time, I wondered if he had learned this powerful and eloquent speech from some missionary teacher. It was a powerful moment.

I thought about that moment several years later when I watched a PBS program, part of a series on religion in America, which focused on Abraham Lincoln's evolving Christian faith during the course of our own Civil War. Before the tragedy of that war, which he had striven mightily to avoid, and before the death of his eleven-year-old son, Lincoln had been somewhat of a religious sideliner. When his parents became Baptists, Lincoln refused to follow suit, and his subsequent connection to what we would call organized religion was pretty tenuous. But the horror of the war he was compelled to conduct, and the deep sense of loss he felt when his son died, far from driving Lincoln away from faith led him to ponder the big questions to which faith should lead us: questions about the meaning and purpose of life; questions about human goodness and human evil, and the will of God for humanity. Lincoln never wore his Christianity on his sleeve, never did identify with an aggressive sectarianism; but perhaps more than any other President, Lincoln came to see his presidency as a profession of his faith.

As I thought about the Zimbabwean elder's careful recitation of Lincoln's masterpiece, it occurred to me that his choice of the Gettysburg Address was really a message to us, a message about faith and truth and freedom in the context of a Zimbabwe that was descending into tyranny and darkness. Our

host had used language he thought would resonate with us. He quoted an American president who had wrestled with the inhumanity of both slavery and war, who had, in the midst of his own and the nation's agony, decided that his only course was to pursue the truth and to act on the assumption that the truth really matters. Lincoln had determined that the truth wasn't a collection of facts or non-facts to be employed and manipulated by a self-interested politician to advance his own agenda—Lincoln had himself earlier wavered on the question of slavery for pragmatic and political reasons; no, Lincoln realized, the truth and only the truth about slavery would ultimately make him and his beloved union free.

Today is Reformation Sunday; it's three days short of the 501st anniversary of the day when Martin Luther nailed a copy of his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In Luther's time, the church door functioned as a kind of bulletin board, and October 31 was the day before All Saints' Day, when large numbers of people would come to worship through that very church door. Luther was announcing to the widest possible audience that his conscience could no longer allow him to be silent about the church's practice of requiring indulgences, monetary contributions that were supposed to pave the way to heaven for souls of relatives that were presumably mired in purgatory. He believed this practice to be both contrary to scripture and an exploitation of poor parishioners. While his immediate target was a particular abuse by a church that had grown complacent and corrupt, the ultimate effect of his protest was to challenge the very authority of the leadership of that church. The pope and his bishops were in denial, Luther said. Only the truth would make the church free.

Lincoln and Luther recognized the inherent and inextricable link between truth and freedom. It's the theme of our text today from the Gospel of John, a text chosen specifically for Reformation Sunday. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

The thing that will most surely destroy any relationship, whether it is the relationship between spouses or lovers, or people and their government, or people and their church, or people and God is the failure to be truthful. Keeping secrets is one of the ways we can fail to be truthful; keeping secrets is not the telling of a lie--it's the living of a lie; and I'm convinced that the most common cause for the failure of marriages is the keeping of secrets, secrets about feelings, or money or intimacy. And closely allied to this sin--and remember that sin isn't a catalogue of misdeeds, but is rather that

fundamental gulf that separates us from God and from one another—closely allied to the sin of keeping secrets is the sin of denial. Denial is really the practice of keeping a secret from ourselves. “The truth hurts,” we frequently say, but more importantly, as Jesus reminds us, the truth frees. When we are truthful, we give to one another, to ourselves, and to God, the most precious gift we can give. We give the gift of our trust, which is making ourselves vulnerable, giving our lives over to another. That’s why truth is an essential component of love.

“What is truth?” a frustrated, or perhaps bored and cynical Pontius Pilate asked Jesus as he tried to figure out what to do with this embodiment of truth who stood before him. Jesus had already answered the question in a discourse with his disciples. “I am the way, the truth and the life,” he had said. Notice that he didn’t say, “Read my book. It has all the answers you need for a happy and successful life.” The religious leaders who were threatened by him were saying essentially that to their followers. “If you obey the law, and we’ll be happy to tell you what the law says, you will do what pleases God, and God, in turn, will take care of you.” It’s really not so different from the multitude of self-help gurus and televangelists who tell you that if you buy the book, or contribute to the cause, or believe what you’re supposed to believe, all your problems will miraculously vanish.

What Jesus taught and, more importantly, what Jesus lived, was “the way.” It wasn’t a neatly formulated doctrine, it was a “way”—a way to live, and yes, a way to die. It’s what makes the Christian faith such a potential force for freedom, but also such a disappointment for those who are uncomfortable with freedom; people who seek the security of rules and regulations; people who are most comfortable in a world of insiders and outsiders, of us and them. God’s word for us, Jesus taught, isn’t found in the words of a book, even a book as revered as the Torah; God’s word for us is not the Word made into more words; it’s the word made flesh. We read God’s word in the life, death and resurrection of a human being, Jesus Christ, one whose ministry was characterized by a radical inclusion, so radical that he extended it even to his enemies as he died on the cross.

That Jesus is the way was Luther’s message to the church authorities of his time. It was a truth so compelling that he could no longer live in the denial of his solitary monk’s cell. It was a message of freedom—not license but freedom. It was the freedom of what Luther called the “priesthood of all believers,” the capacity of each and every one of us to confront scripture and to be confronted by

scripture. Not that scripture was the final word, but scripture points our way toward Jesus, who is himself the Way. Luther used a nice image for this relationship when he said that the Bible is the manger in which Jesus was laid. We don't worship the manger; we worship the child in the manger.

Today, on this Reformation Day, we aren't celebrating an accomplished fact, and we're certainly not celebrating the triumph of one sect over another. We're celebrating a moment on the Way, a moment when an imperfect man had the courage to confront power with truth. We're not celebrating a historical date, but rather the beginning of a process, a process that has been and will be renewed over and over again as long as we remain imperfect mortals who seek to be closer to God. We are on the way, not reformed, but reforming, *semper reformanda*, always reforming and needing to be reformed, always being recreated; always reformulating our church in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus Christ is the truth that sets us free. Amen.