

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 8:31-16

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Reformation Sunday, a day celebrated with our kin who grow out of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. So Lutherans, Congregationalists (UCC) the church of the Puritans, some Baptists, and others consider themselves reformed. Many more are in our Protestant family. What started as an opportunity to refine and reform the Roman Catholic church, not divide it, did just that. Schism in Western Christianity happened about 500 years ago. It is called the "Great Reformation."

Proclamation of the Word

500 Years...that's a long time since John Knox and our protesting forebears roamed the earth, were burned at stakes, and sent into exile. John Knox did not start out as a clergy. He was the sword wielding protector of the bishop, because in those days with matters of Church and State intertwined. The Faith was always political and dangerous.

But 500 years before that, another Great Schism occurred. The divide and conflict was then between the East and West and the result was the Eastern Orthodox Church and her children, and the Roman Catholic Church. The big conflict was other the *filioque* or the question of the Holy Spirit relationship to the Father and Son in the Trinity. The pope in Rome excommunicated Constantinople, and Constantinople, seeing herself as the crown of Constantine, returned the favor and excommunicated Rome.

And 500 years or so before that marks the fall of the Roman Empire and a split between Western Christianity and Middle Eastern/African. The split then was defined at the Council of Chalcedon over the nature of Jesus. Was he divine? human? The Council decided yes, Jesus was the fully divine, fully

human expression of Almighty God. And another Great, Gregory the Great, a pope got to clean up the mess in the West.

Phyllis Tickle has written about this trend in her book, The Great Emergence,ⁱ stating that today, 500 years after the Great Reformation, we are now living through the Great Emergence. The Right Rev. Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop, with wit and humor observes that the church of Jesus Christ, feels compelled to hold a rummage sale about every 500 years. Now if you don't know what a rummage sale is, you might know it as a Yard Sale. Before our church started a Thrift Shop, my mother would collect all those unused things that collect like outgrown clothes, old dishes and toys, whatever, and hold a Yard Sale, usually with another friend. We would make little price tags: .25, .50, \$1. For a child, it was just a fun way to play store, make change, count money and practice my selling skills. In a rummage sale, you decide what is critical and what needs to be let go of, cleaned out, in order to live today. In the same way the church, which collects its own clutter and outdated traditions, is usually forced to do the same.

Just like those huge shifts that happened not only in Christianity, but in culture, this Great Emergence has been slipping up on us over decades. Many folks, including myself, voice the disorientation we feel in general, but also as people of faith, when we say things like, "This is not the church I grew up in." We are expressing the loss and grief of a bygone era. For instance, I recall my mother talking about Sundays as church day, no businesses were open except hospitals and necessary services. It was the day with the invention of the automobile that families began to go for Sunday drives or make visits to lonely neighbors and widowed or elderly family members. Growing up in the 1970's and 80's in York, SC, I was living in the last years of this way of life. Our children live in a vastly different world. Just as Gutenberg's printing press changed the world, the internet and Google is doing it again. The church exists in the world and the world has changed so rapidly in the last hundred years that we are dazed and confused about where we are and where are going sometimes. So I find this overview of history helpful, to add a bit of perspective to our collective lives. I also find that whatever rummage sale we are undergoing now, will be for the best in the long run even if change feels uncomfortable.

One of the rally cries of the Great Reformation was *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* — "The reformed church, always being reformed according to the Word of God." Now the Word of God here is capital W, the Word of God, being God made flesh in Jesus Christ. We are not reformed for the sake of change, but in order to be conformed into Christ's image, to live by his teaching, and to be his church, light for the world and salt that seasons. But one way we know Jesus, the Word of God, is through Scripture (lower case word of God).

Scripture reveals God to us. About 500 years before the Roman empire fell, Jesus, the word of God, was born. In today's passage from John, we see Jesus speaking to the leaders of his day, a time of great division and struggle, too, between Jewish Christians and the Jewish establishment. Jesus challenges them with the reminder that last throughout the ages. Listen!

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:33-34)

The truth is Jesus, God most fully revealed to us. And his word is his teaching. Our Protestant reformers have a timeless reminder to us today. It is about Jesus. Jesus is Lord of our lives, Lord of Heaven and Earth. His teaching is the guide for our lives. We have been gifted with the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is what makes us free! The good news of Jesus brings freedom.

The Jews standing there say, we are not slaves, we are already free. They misunderstood. They remember how their ancestors were slaves in Egypt. But Jesus is speaking of a different kind of slavery.

I think of people I talk to day by day, and I see a longing for freedom. They are not literally slaves, but bondage exists. The main bondage I see is folks feeling trapped in a stressful and overwhelming work and social life that demands more and more and more.

They seem harassed by their lifestyle.

As I encounter people lately, I think of the words in Jesus' parable of the Laborer and the Vineyard, from Matthew 9:36 “When JESUS saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were **harassed** and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

In our quest for more, more money, more status, more stuff, more information, more knowledge, our lives have less room for meaningful time in the presence of God and with our community of believers. I find that when I feel stretched, I must re-center my focus on God, through Scripture and friendships with people of faith. We must connect to the Shepherd, the way, the truth and the life. I see lots of people who are living, but not truly alive. This may be one kind of bondage in our day.

Another consequence of our fast-living, crazy busy lives is our lack of relationships with others. We have less time for it. And we are not only disconnected from God, but each other. We have less time to be concerned with the poor and the needy as Jesus and the Law, the Torah, teach us. We become self-absorbed and overwhelmed, without connection.

God led his people out of bondage into freedom so that his people could worship the Lord only and love neighbor. This is exactly what the Law and the 10 Commandments pointed to, the means to love God and love neighbors. That is our purpose, no matter the age the challenges before us.

Dr. Bob Moorehead, a retired pastor, wrote almost 20 years ago an apt description in "The Paradox of our Time"ⁱⁱ

We have taller buildings but shorter tempers; wider freeways but narrower viewpoints; we spend

more but have less; we buy more but enjoy it less; we have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, yet less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgment; more experts, yet more problems; we have more gadgets but less satisfaction; more medicine, yet less wellness; we take more vitamins but see fewer results. We drink too much; smoke too much; spend too recklessly; laugh too little; drive too fast; get too angry quickly; stay up too late; get up too tired; read too seldom; watch TV too much and pray too seldom. ...we talk too much; love too seldom and lie too often. We've learned how to make a living, but not a life; we've added years to life, not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor...

What is it that we need to clean out of our lives, our church and place on the rummage sale table?
...our expectation that we live in the 1950s church in a 2014 world, perhaps

And what do we let go of so that we might get to the heart of being fully alive in Christ Jesus?
...pettiness, fear and anxiety, busyness, things that lead to bondage of sin...

Into this new world as in times past, Jesus reminds us
"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:33-34)

Perhaps we are living through a Great Emergence, but our God is timeless and the word of God stands forever. The covenant of God, the teachings of God are written on our hearts for those who first seek God and seek to love others in Jesus' name. We may not know what is emerging in our world of drastic change, but we know the One who is with us. We have been given signs and guideposts along the way, but so we do not miss them, we must make time to focus on our life of discipleship, putting God first. Each of us can make choices to make Bible study, worship, community, and service a priority.

Story: Now You go Behave

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once told a story of teaching a confirmation class years ago in which he outlined the meaning of the Mosaic Covenant. He went step by step through it, explaining the promise of God, that God would rescue the Hebrew people from slavery and that they would worship only God and then act in ways that show themselves to be liberated people. And he showed them how that principle showed up in the teaching of Jesus later on. When finished he asked them as a review to tell him what he had just said. He got a variety of attempts, some close some not. Then one little boy raised his hand and put it better than any theologian could have. He said (quoting God), "I saved your butts, so now you go behave."

Be the person God desires you to be.

And let us be the Church God desires us to be for this time and this place as we follow Jesus and his teachings together.

ⁱ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, (baker Books:GranRapid, MI, 2008) overview is a summary of Ch. 1-5.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Bob Moorehead, former pastor of Seattle's Overlake Christian Church (who retired in 1998 after 29 years in that post). This essay appeared under the title "The Paradox of Our Age" in *Words Aptly Spoken*, Dr. Moorehead's 1995 collection of prayers, homilies, and monologues used in his sermons and radio broadcasts.