

Sermon: God is God and We Are Not

Scripture: Psalm 103

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The Reformer from Geneva, John Calvin, wrote once – “Man, with all his shrewdness, is about as stupid in understanding the mysteries of God as an ass is in understanding musical harmony.” Nice, eh? Tell us what you really think John. Calvin, like Luther and Zwingli, wasn’t exactly a humble guy, but a central theme for their reforming of the church, that they returned to time and again, was the Sovereignty of God and the subordinate, secondary nature of humans and their institutions. God is God and we are human and decidedly not God and this we must remember above all else. A caution to the Priesthood of All Believers doctrine, that we need no mediator but Christ, and Scripture Only, that scripture and not the church is our prime authority, is that we may be priests ourselves and encouraged to read and interpret scripture ourselves, but we remember that we comprehend the mysteries of God, in the end, about as well as an ass understands harmony.

God is God and we are not. All of this, you understand, the reformers were leveling against a corrupt church, a church that was saying “we will offer the final authority, we will speak for God.” And the reformers said “no, actually, only God is God and only Jesus speaks for God, so step off buddy!” But then of course the challenge for the reformers was to make their teachings and their words stick because if you say there is no authority but God then how do you get people to trust your authority anymore than the authority you’re supplanting? Well, they pointed to scripture and said “if we are wrong then prove it

by the scripture, but until that point,” Luther would famously say, “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Still the church was not happy at being disrespected so and believed the reformers were sowing seeds of discord and anarchy, threatening the very fabric of society by turning such power over to the people, that it was a recipe for splintering of the church... And sure enough the church was not wrong, for here we are 500 years later in a protestant tradition that has over 25,000 different denominations claiming that their understanding and practice is the right one.

At the time of the Reformation, it didn't take long for the splintering to begin and do you know what the first and greatest controversy among the reformers themselves was? It was how to explain what happens when we come to this table for communion. Isn't that ironic! This table of love where we receive the broken body and shed blood of Christ in order to be united again to God and was the source of enormous tension and division between the reformers. So much so that the camaraderie between Luther and Zwingli and Bucer turned pretty nasty and at one point because Zwingli and Bucer wrote that the Lord's supper was more symbolic than an offering of the real presence of Christ, Martin Luther called them “false prophets, inspired by the wicked one, minions of Satan.” While the Catholic Church stepped back and was like “woah, ouch! What did we tell you!”

But they were hotheads and what they were struggling against was important. Don't forget that we are Protestants which means in our DNA, at the very root of who we are as Christians, is the penchant towards protest and isn't it interesting that one of the protest that made us protest-ants was that we *sat down* at the communion table when we

were supposed to stand up. You see the priest did the sacrifice of the mass up here at the altar and the people were supposed to come forward and receive Christ from the hand of the priest, but after Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon and others were done, they gathered communities together and held communion services where the people sat down in their seats, in their pews and passed the body of Christ and the cup to one another. Here me when I say that this was radical resistance. Their remaining seated spoke volumes about the problems in the church.

Sound familiar? It's not so different from the NFL players protesting by kneeling for the national anthem... in fact, in comparison, their protest is gentle, subtle, even a gracious protest, compared to the seat that 16th century protestants took at communion when they should have been standing. Talk about disrespectful! Talk about sons of you-know-whats! The Pope and the bishops called the reformers and their followers at least that and worse for, according to them, these people were disrespecting God, God-self! But sometimes you gotta protest to highlight injustice and the need for change and the powers never like it. It's always the way of power and privilege, across history, to see protests as inappropriate, dangerous and blasphemous. "Stand up when you receive the Eucharist from us! Otherwise you are disrespecting us and disrespecting God." And the reformers believed that their taking a seat was the only way they could actually be faithful to God, so far off-base had the church gone. And so they had everyone stay right where they were in their seats and they passed a plate of bread and the cup saying this is yours not ours, this is God's gift to you, no one in between. We excused ourselves from the altar of the Catholic Church and went

and sat our butts down at the table of the Lord. It was beyond a radical protest, it was a revolutionary act and that my friends is where Protestant Christianity began.

We would be doing well if we could reclaim our true Protestant heritage in this way, if we could remember that being PROTESTANT Christian means that at times we must protest the injustices of our society and the inequities of our country and wrongs of our world. We don't so much anymore, I'd suggest, because those of us who are white Protestant Mainline Christians are now the status quo, we do not do so much protesting of our society because we sit a top of it... for what possible reason would we have for upending and protesting a structure that benefits us?!

Well, there's only one reason that I could see – if we were followers of Jesus Christ... then we'd have reason, because that is exactly what he did. As the incarnation of God, and God is God, sitting a top everything as Sovereign of the Universe, he humbled himself to the very bottom, became despised and convicted and executed as an enemy of the state, sacrificed himself fully for the sake of everyone else but especially those crushed at the bottom. That's our model, Jesus' self-sacrificial act for others, that's the only reason we as White Protestants at the top of society should still find ourselves in the business of protesting from the bottom because following Jesus Christ requires it!

And communion can be at the center of it. There are so many levels of radical, world-upending meanings that are going on when we innocently sit in our pews, taking a little piece of bread, calling it Christ's body, and drinking of the cup of Christ's blood.

Let me just close with an example since we are, after all, celebration Earth Communion Sunday. What if we, Protest-ants, need to reclaim our protestant roots and practices in the face of our very earth being under threat of degradation because of human practices of consumption, carelessness and violence. We are in a unique position as Protestant Christians to accompany the eco-justice movement because

1. theologically we believe that God is God and the earth is the Lord's and all that is therein, therefore we cannot abide the use and abuse of the earth for it is not our earth to do with as we please, we have been charged with being stewards over it. We have clear theological ground to stand on for our protest. And
2. We have in communion itself this reminder that God is in earthen materiality and that the crucifixion of Christ continues in the crucifixion of nature. Glance at a picture of an old growth forest denuded by loggers for us to build our too big houses and tell me it doesn't speak to you of the crucifixion! We have the imagery for our protest. And
3. As Protestants, we have in our heritage, in our very DNA, the fact that being Christian and faithful to God alone at times, at critical times, involves PROTEST, uncomfortable, making-a-lot-of-people-uncomfortable, especially the powers-that-be, protest. We have the backing for it in our very tradition. Could we make our voices heard to effect real change in the environmental crisis, for God's sake, for God is God and we are not, but maybe we have been called to be the hands and feet and heart of God's protest of the injustices of our world and that even through the likes of us God could do God's sacrificial work of transformative love for the sake of others.