

Lenten Sermon 5 (2006): The Reforming Center

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Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Text: Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Hebrews 5:8

In May, 2004, “nearly two hundred ministers from thirty-four states, three countries and more than fifteen denominations” gathered at Rochester College to prepare themselves to preach from the Psalms. Taken alone, this may not sound important. But these ministers represented a rich ecumenical mix. Our own UCC was represented among a majority from the conservative Churches of Christ, there were others from the American and Southern Baptists, Free and United Methodists and still more. They joined in that meeting self-consciously as the “Reforming Center” of Protestant Christianity. There, they produced a remarkable document *Performing the Psalms*. Dave Bland and David Fleer wrote in the introduction:

Church historians have long noted Protestant Christianity’s evolution into *two parties*: evangelical and mainline, conservative and liberal. In the last few years, however, we have experienced an original migration to a reforming *center*, where large numbers from each part are finding they share substantive Christian views. Evangelical and mainline Christians are discovering that they hold in common absolute devotion to an essential issue: Scripture envisions a transcendent being and human existence more real than the illusory world offered by the dominant ideologies of our culture. This Reforming Center is a community that desires to be lifted past old barriers and labels, and longs for a new paradigm for reading and preaching from the world created in scripture.^[1]

Mrs. Garrett and I are pastors of the reforming center of Protestant Christianity. We serve a richly mixed parish and one that has, over the past several years, seen growing diversity. We teach in ways that take seriously the language of worship and of scripture and the world created in scripture. I understand the present project of which I am part at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton to be yet another clear expression of this reforming center. In fact, CTI has probably done more, institutionally, than any other force in American Protestantism to further this conversation and meeting at the center. For instance, George Hunsinger, formerly of Bangor Theological Seminary, spent fruitful years at CTI before going on faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary. George has been one of the chief advocates for what come to be known as “generous Orthodoxy”. While Mrs. Garrett and I eschew labels and what I have called “adjectival Christianity”, it is fair to say that we do subscribe to and teach a “generous” orthodoxy, although, in fact, the old orthodoxy is not particularly ungenerous though some of its advocates, from time to time, have been.

Even before my work at CTI, I was a member of a theological renewal group within the United Church of Christ known as “Confessing Christ as Lord and Savior” (or more simply, “Confessing Christ”). I am now on the national steering committee of that body. For several years, our congregation sponsored Confessing Christ events and contributed financially. More recently our Diaconate became impatient with the apparent lack of fruit from this enterprise and redirected the mission funds (with my agreement) though they continue to encourage my involvement in these renewing conversations. We, in Confessing Christ, have always described our position as “centrist.”

^[1] Dave Bland and David Fleer, “Introduction,” *Performing the Psalms*, St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2005, pp. 1-2.

The term “centrist” required comment, for it plays directly into the mind set that sees the poles of Protestant expression in rigidly political terms, as Fleer and Bland put it, “conservative verses liberal”. The usual response is, “Well, there you go again, seeking a compromise position between the left wing and the right wing, between Republican positions and Democratic positions.

There are those who see an emphasis on “the center” as compromising, even cowardly. Some embrace it because it seems to demand little of them. Others see it as a hypocritical attempt of some preachers to claim to be “a-political,” “above the fray”. I do not understand the Christian center in that way at all. The Christian center is not about partisan, secular politics or even the attempt of certain self-identified political wings of religious organizations to influence national politics. The Christian, reforming center, is defined by the central doctrines and beliefs of the Christian faith. We hold a very high view of Scriptural authority for the church and we are also eager to be informed, as George Hunsinger was able to entice the Presbyterian Church USA to be so informed, by Christian church tradition and the ancient creeds of the church.

The church is not something we make up new. God has been at work for a very long time—has done decisive things and pronounced decisive words. We have received this faith and have been invited into the community formed by it. There has been a lot of conversation and learning and experience that has preceded our own. We need to engage the tradition, under the authority of Scripture, to learn how Christians have not only survived as a powerful witness of Jesus Christ in the world and have shaped the world, in many eras, for good, but to actually understand what we are up against, as Christians, in our own time, how we can best live in Christ, and how we can engage the killing powers of disintegration and oppression in our own day. Someone said that Christian preaching often takes the form of a “mild-mannered person speaking to a group of mild-mannered people, urging them to be even more mild-mannered”. This is not how I understand the task of preaching nor the nature of the Christian congregation.

We are in the midst of a remarkable Christian reformation. Christianity is the fastest growing faith in the southern hemisphere, most active in Africa and in South America. Korea, in just a few years, will be the largest sending nation of Christian missionaries in the world. The presence of Christianity and its power in Asia with growing influence even in China, is still largely hidden, but what can be seen is quite remarkable.

Moreover, what often appears to be the death of Christian life in America is primarily felt in denominational headquarters, not in the pews. Schisms rending many American Protestant denominations and the disintegration of our own denomination about which I have spoken in this series take up a lot of newsprint and occupy mainstream minds. What we should focus on, however, is the amazing new union of theological conversation and sharing now going on all across our continent. Evangelical Christians who once completely rejected church tradition are now engaged in fruitful conversations with Roman Catholics. Roman Catholics and Lutherans have reached an accord and a common understanding on justification by faith alone, the very explosive theological charge that began the Protestant Reformation. Christians of all denominations and shades of belief are coming together in ever greater numbers and congregations are sharing more and more in ways that, in a not too distant past looking for ecumenical cooperation, would have been newsworthy and seen as very positive indeed. As Father Kevin Holsapple noted, “There are many pension plans, but just two churches.” It is not exactly true—yet—but it is true enough to think about, with evidence around us for this kind of reality.

Here, on Maundy Thursday, you will worship and share table fellowship with Advent Christians and American Baptists as two other congregations join us for word and sacrament. The Pastor Theologian group that I have moderated for two years now locally does not seek institutional unity, but we have been able to share a concern for Biblical authority, sacramental theology, and the catholicity of the church.

This work is not easy and the outcomes are hidden in the future, but it is, I believe, important work and the very kind of outreach that Jesus himself urged on the night of his betrayal when he prayed to his Father that his followers might all be one even as he and the Father were one.

While the signs are hopeful and the reforming center in many different manifestations embraces thousands, we are still new at this.^{2[2]} There are those who insist on the old ways of political polarization and division, dividing people up into right thinking and wrong thinking (as they themselves define these things) and never submitting their own world view to the scrutiny or judgment of Scripture. Learning a new language takes time. You can't rush it. It requires care and constancy and a lot of practice.

One of the most obvious ways that we have begun to teach this new language is Mrs. Garrett's practice of push-ups. If you go on an All Souls mission trip and you are ever heard using language that puts another person down, Mrs. Garrett will say, "Get down and give me five!" If you keep it up, the number of push ups increases. It is a fun sort of way to teach Christian speech and Christian attitudes. After some years of shared mission work, we find high school kids coming to friends at soccer games or basketball games or other competitive sporting events. Even though they come from the opposing high school, they slip over to the opposite side and give encouraging words to their Christian friends on the opposing team. This doesn't mean that they don't want their own school team to win; it just means that there is another kind of speech going on as well.

Walter Brueggemann says the task of the preacher is to "re-narrate" the life of the congregation in Biblical terms. As I have said before, this kind of work is intense, particular and very time consuming. As a congregation we've not been at it very long, less than two decades. I hope you find the teaching and behavior here to be consistent with the reforming center of the wider church.

To live in the Christian center, that is at the heart of the faith, in Christ's full embrace of his bride, the church, we need to appropriate and internalize the language of Scripture in order to be able to imagine the world that Scripture envisions. In a particularly challenging image, Eugene Peterson says that we must learn to speak in the "middle voice". We have little practice at this because, frankly, in English (as in almost all modern languages) there is no "middle voice". Peterson learned the middle voice when he studied ancient Greek.

When I speak in the active voice, I initiate an action that goes someplace else: "I counsel my friend." When I speak in the passive voice, I receive the action that another initiates: "I am counseled by my friend." When I speak in the middle voice, I actively participate in the results of an action that another initiates: "I take counsel." Most of our speech is divided between active and passive; either I act or I am acted upon. But there are moments, and they are those in which we are most distinctively human, when such a contrast is not satisfactory: two wills operate, neither to the exclusion of the other, neither canceling out the other, each respecting the other.^{3[3]}

With no middle voice, our every day language provides us with two choices. Either we take charge of our destiny (the active voice) and assert ourselves, or we become the recipients of the assertiveness and actions of others (the passive voice). This effectively divides the world – or at least our way of conceiving and talking about it – into winners and losers, the active and the passive. "The gospel," says

^{2[2]} United Methodist theologian and church historian Thomas C. Oden has published, this year, a book on various renewal movements within the Protestant "mainline". The book is *Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2006, 270 pp.

^{3[3]} Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 103

Peterson, “restores the middle voice. We learn to live with praying-willing involvement in an action that we do not originate. We become subjects in an action in which we are personally involved”.^{4[4]}

At our human and Christian best we are not fascists barking our orders to God and his creatures. At our human and Christian best we are not quietists dumbly submissive before fate. At our human and Christian best we pray in the middle voice at the center between active and passive, drawing from them as we have need and occasion but always uniquely and artistically ourselves, creatures adoring God and being graced by him, “participating in the results of the action”.^{5[5]}

Cultivating the middle voice, learning this way to speak, leads us into a new stance toward God and other people, into a language necessary for human relationships (such as friendship and marriage), namely, a “willed passivity”. It is hard to learn a new way to speak, to think, to be. The language of Scripture and of Christian worship are the best tutors we have. They require of us fundamental and life-altering changes: repentance, turning, walking and talking and thinking in new ways, ways transformed and informed by the Gospel of Christ.

The reforming, renewing center, with a middle voice, is not safe middle ground. It is transformative and judging, subversive of life as we know it, and insistent on life as God made it. It is opposed to an absolutism that “always silences dissent and excommunicates those who do not consent, submit and conform.” It opposes our desire to impose our own ideology, supporting our self-interest, making treasonable or heretical “all those who think otherwise”. It opposes our penchant to reduce complexities to one option “that characteristically tilts toward and advantages those who are presently powerful and privileged”.^{6[6]}

When we say, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,” we are making a statement about the power of the relational word over the importance of a current event, a passing moment, a fleeting image. Jesus Christ, that is, God incarnate is the Word that is seen and heard. Jacques Ellul wrote:

The incarnation is the only moment in world history when truth joins reality, when it completely penetrates reality and therefore changes it at its root...At this moment the word can be seen. Sight can be believed.^{7[7]}

Our world would be amazingly different if we would stop fooling ourselves. Christ did not come to the world because no one needed him. He came to meet us in our greatest need—not to condemn but to save, not to destroy but to vivify—to bring faith and sight together. We have available the language for showing and saying this powerful truth to a world of desperate need, to hearts of deep longing, to minds that hunger for purpose and understanding, to souls thirsting for life.

The action we join ourselves to is the action initiated by God and in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, when Jesus was crucified on the cross and then raised in his body to new and glorious life. As P.T. Forsyth wrote,

The sacrifice of the Cross was not man in Christ pleasing God; it was God in Christ reconciling man, and in a certain sense, reconciling Himself ... the Cross of Christ was Christ reconciling

^{4[4]} Peterson, op cit., pp 104-105.

^{5[5]} Ibid., p. 105

^{6[6]} Walter Brueggemann, “The Psalms as Limit Expressions,” *Performing the Psalms*, pp. 35-36.

^{7[7]} Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 1964, p. 80.

[humanity]. It was not heroic man dying for a beloved and honoured God; it was God in some form dying for [humanity]^{8[8]}

To say that Christ was punished by God who was always well pleased with Him is an outrageous thing. Calvin himself repudiates the idea. But we may say that Christ did, at the depth of that great act of self-identification with us when He became man, enter the sphere of sin's penalty and the horror of sin's curse, in order that, from the very midst and depth of it, His confession and praise of God's holiness might rise like a spring of fresh water at the bottom of a bitter sea, and sweeten it all.^{9[9]}

This is the center where the church finds life. This is the action we join. God was working long before hand, remember—long beforehand with your soul. This is the language we shall borrow from which to fashion our praise and to refashion completely the way we see and know and live in the world that God has so wonderfully and graciously given us.

Do you think life could be better? You're right! The Spirit says, "Come".

^{8[8]} P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 25.

^{9[9]} *Ibid.*, pp. 146-48.