

“A Teachable Spirit”

Job 42:1-6, Mark 10: 46-52

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Reformation Sunday

John Calvin thought of the church’s teaching ministry as a crucial part of its life. Calvin frequently uses teaching-learning imagery to describe the nature of the church. God is presented as being like a teacher, using the ordinary means of creation to communicate knowledge appropriate to the capacities and needs of the pupils. The proper human attitude toward this knowledge is one of “teachableness.” -- Richard Osmer

Confession of Faith --The Scots Confession (1560 A.D.)

The notes of the true Kirk, we believe, confess and avow to be:

First the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us,
As the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; Secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God
To seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly administered,
As God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.

Here is a Wall with 4 giant statues in Geneva Switzerland: the Reformers wall:

4 giant statues of John Calvin and his buddies. Calvin would be so mortified to have this idolatrous image of himself. But Calvin’s approach to faith was one that was involved with the city, involved with public policies, involved with politics, and he and they had done so much for the City of Geneva, the city dedicated this monument to them and their work.

Carved in the back of the wall behind Calvin and his friends (in Latin) is the watchword phrase of the Reformation: “Out of darkness, Light.”

In today’s scripture, the blind man, sitting in darkness as Jesus passes by yells: “Son of David, show me mercy! He YELLS: Son of David, show me mercy!

This is not a man who is halfhearted. Holding back. No mamby pamby, mealy mouthed and halfhearted suggestion. No, gosh, gee, maybe, if it isn’t too much trouble, mumbling. No! This man is passionate. He knows what he wants.

He knows what he needs!

And Jesus loves it! Jesus can work with someone who is passionate!

The first sign of faith: is a passionate awareness of what you lack. And a public passion to let your needs be known. Jesus hears his passion. He stops.

He asks the man: What do you want?

“Teacher, I want to see.” In other words: Going from blindness to sight requires the will to see. Passivity will not get you anywhere. Daydreaming is not enough. I want to see: It is my will to see. Faith is about mobilizing the will. What do you want – what do you will? I will to see.

And this miracle happens.

The Blind Man, at this crucial intersection does not call him Lord, or Son of David or any of the other titles. He calls Jesus: Teacher. How does Jesus heal the man? He teaches him. And the teaching allows him to see.

When you think about miracles: have you recognized they can come through teaching? The teaching of Jesus takes those in darkness and brings them light!

According to Richard Osmer, the way that John Calvin saw God was as a teacher. “Using ordinary means of creation to communicate knowledge appropriate to the needs of people.” The appropriate orientation of people toward God is not subservience, not being docile, but ready to learn. Having the will to learn.

Before he became the minister in the small church where I grew up, Carl Ericson had been photo editor for the Washington DC bureau of the Associated Press. No photo and caption went out from AP in Washington that Carl didn’t choose. He was used to the heady world of the Capital, and used to going to White House tea parties.

Then, at age 40, he decided to follow the call: he went to seminary. He had always been a self-proclaimed “superior ego.” When he got to Greek class, He was being his usual self, which is to say, he was being a smart aleck with his professor. They were translating the beatitudes:

Carl said: “What’s all this stuff about “Blessed are the meek.”
His teacher shot back: “Blessed are the meek means blessed are the teachable.”

Calvin would have been so pleased! If God is the teacher, then the orientation of the believer is to be teachable. Open. Showing the will to learn. The discipline to learn.

It starts with the Bible. The pastor become seriously disciplined about interpreting the Bible. The congregation shows a serious willingness to be teachable. Teachability is key.

But there may be bigger, controversial issues. Conflicts. Disagreements. Those are discussed by Seminaries and the Presbytery and General Assembly. Gatherings of people who seek themselves to be teachable, learning together. They could then authentically teach others. Including pastors of local churches.

This is about authority. Authority is not something that is commanded. It is recognized. You recognize someone's authority, and you open yourself to it.

Who has the truth? For Presbyterians, it is a disciplined search. It is not just going through the motions. It is not just shooting off your mouth. And it is not mouthing the platitudes or policies of a political party.

Calvin did not emphasize the priority of individual prayer and meditation: those could reinforce the faith, but not further and correct it. In fact, pride could misguide the self. For Calvin, the emphasis was on the Holy Spirit. In fact, there was a revival of understanding the Holy Spirit by John Calvin. Because the Holy Spirit moves through the people of the church. Seriously searching the Bible: opening themselves to the Holy Spirit. Calvin took the ordained offices of the church and its gathered councils very seriously. It is gathered, disciplined Christians where the Holy Spirit speaks.

If the people were to be teachable through the pastor,
The pastors were to be teachable through the councils,
The councils were to be teachable through other councils.
They in turn could be challenged and corrected through pastors and churches.

If you get the picture: There is no one person who knows it all. No one infallible person at the top. We are all to have this attitude, this orientation, this virtue, of being teachable. With God as our teacher, teaching us through other disciplined Christians.

Without parallel, God teaches us through Scripture. Not a Scripture that you can proof-text, cite one verse to end an argument. Rather, through the whole of the scripture, placed in its context, interpreted with the touchstone of God's love, shown in Jesus.

That is where the Holy Spirit works. And then, as the Spirit moves, there happens that marvelous moment: "Out of darkness, light." And the world looks different. New. Faith is a way of seeing.

Faith is about a church, as the Scots called it, a kirk, a community of people who share perceptions about how the world fits together.

Thomas Kuhn: in his classic book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* says in the world of science, anomalies mount up: when the defining metaphor of the age has holes in it, then we become open to new possibilities. New paradigms. When a new metaphor comes into focus, our whole orientation changes.

For us as people of faith, when one way of seeing the world ceases to hold its rationale together, then the Holy Spirit opens up a different part of the Bible,
And different understanding of a passage. And all of a sudden we see the world anew through a new understanding of faith.

When some people think about religion, they think of something that cannot change. They think religion can't change. Not Presbyterians. Our motto is: Reformed and always reforming. In fact, our sister church in Australia is named: The Reforming Church.

We live in a time, like John Calvin, when the church needs to be involved in the world. There are visions and values and insights that we have, that the world desperately needs. Ideas like truth, compassion, justice, love, the common good, love of the alien in our midst, love of neighbor.

But to have a voice that the world needs to hear, we need to be teachable. The Holy Spirit speaks: but like the blind man in the story we have to have the will and the willingness to let Jesus speak to us. To teach us.

It's Reformation Sunday: a way when we love all things Scottish. I have a story I heard 30 years ago from an old Scotsman. If I slip into a little brogue, it's because that's how I first heard this story and still hear it in my mind.

It happened a long time ago, on the north coast of Scotland, on a rocky promontory that stuck out into the North Sea. There was a village on a hill. At the top of the hill was the Kirk, where the people would gather every Sunday evening to worship and pray.

But on this night, a Nor-easter blew in: the driving rain turned to blinding snow. Ya counna see your hand in frunt of yar face.

But the minister saw it was time, he put on his coat, made the long cold trip through the snow up the long steps on the big hill to the Kirk.

He kicked the snow away enough to open the big wooden door. He entered the ice cold sanctuary, began one by one, going around to the candles on the wall on the chandeliers, until the place shone like a beacon. He light the fire to warm the place.

Sat back and waited. The hour for worship came, but none of the people.

He waited and waited. He waited a full hour. And more. Not one person came. Finally, He put out the fire, and slowly, one by one extinguished the candles.

And then, with no hymns sung, no scripture preached, he locked the door behind him, and trudged down the hill, through the snow. With every step, He felt useless. Dejected.

At home, he fixed his supper in silence, and was just ready to turn in, when there was a loud knock at the door. And another.

He opened the door, and standing there in the driving snow, was an imposing man in the oil slicked coat of a sailor. The big man came in, and blurted out: "You're from the kirk?!" The pastor nodded.

"I came to thank ye. To thank ye for the light. The light in the kirk. I got caught out in the storm. In the waves and the wind, I got turned around. I was headed straight for the rocks. I surely would have perished. But then I saw the light. The light in the Kirk. It saved me. I came to thank you for the light!"

I have always remembered that story. When it's dark and the winter winds blow. Out of darkness, light.

If we would offer a saving kind of light, we have to be bold about what the world needs. For us to bear that light to the world, we have to be teachable. To talk about what truly matters. To be teachable, we have to have the capacity to have our minds changed. It is Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, through the church: that will help us experience and share that amazing experience of faith:

Out of darkness, Light.