

Thessalonians 2:9-13

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. **We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.**

“God’s Word”

Ordained a priest in 1506, Ulrich Zwingli used Erasmus’ work and translations of the Greek New Testament, straight from the Greek, rather than the Latin Vulgate to focus his New Testament studies. The Swiss Reformation began from Zwingli’s sermons on the New Testament in 1519. In 1523 Zwingli, who was still a Catholic priest, boldly stated that the sole basis of truth was the gospel. He challenged the claim that church tradition could equal the truth contained in scriptures themselves. Paul would agree. In our epistle lesson he clearly states that he is a witness to God’s word, but that the Thessalonians rightly accepted the gospel they heard, not Paul, as God’s word.

As Paul writes to the Thessalonians in the oldest epistle we have a record of, “when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Thes. 2:13) It is God’s word that found the Thessalonians and claimed them. Paul was a messenger and mentor in the gospel, but there would be nothing to celebrate had it not been for God’s word flowing through Paul.

Through the Spirit we communicate God’s word as well. This knowledge is both frightening and emboldening at the same time. God’s word is at work in us, constantly challenging us as no human word ever could. Reform--reform! The scriptures challenge every culture, every church, and every individual’s notion of accommodation to this world. Reform based on God’s word often leads us to take roads we would rather not venture down.

In a recent article in *The Christian Century* Will Willimon, who was until a year ago the Dean of the Duke University Chapel, related what he’s learned during his first year as bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. “The great genius of Protestant Christianity is in the living, breathing local communities of faith, congregations that struggle to embody that which they profess in places that only Jesus could love. God is forcing me to take the side roads and attend to the local and the particular...” Willimon’s found that “one of the reasons why our church is in such a mess is Jesus.”¹ When you look at the particular, in the church or in each one of us,

through the lens of God's word, you'll find that amazing faithfulness and infidelity coexist together.

Hilda, a minister under Willimon's care was assigned to a run down, falling apart country church. "Still," she said, "a bad-looking, run-down, ugly church can be a blessing." Hilda thought the little church could be a blessing to people whose lives are a mess. They cannot bear to go to a perfectly kept up church, it just makes them feel worse. She had 12 parishioners when she started. So she went out and found some people who had nothing better to do the next Sunday morning and brought them to church and ended up baptizing six of them. Bishop Willimon responded that Hilda had done wonderful work in reaching out and following the word of God. "Not so fast, bishop," she said. "The week after I baptized them, we lost six of our most dedicated members...they didn't want to go to church with a bunch of crackheads and their kids," she explained. Willimon responded "Hilda, did you make clear to them that you and I just work for Jesus? We have no discretion in the matter of whom Jesus calls? Did you tell them that? Did you tell them that you and I don't like some of the people he attracts either? We can't be blamed for Jesus' friends."

The living Word calls to us and calls to us REFORM. Reform our hearts and minds to God's word instead of this notions of this world. As Christians we proclaim as Joshua did to the people Israel in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures "draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God." (Josh. 3:9) We read the Bible, we listen, we look, we wait, we respond to the living God at work in us and in the world.

God claims us and refuses to let us go despite our sin. God told Joshua "I will be with you as I was with Moses." (Josh. 3:7b) These were the words the new leader needed in order to lead God's people across the river Jordan. Today we need assurance of our living God's with us just as desperately. There is no hierarchy here at CPC. Collectively we are the priesthood of all believers. You are the voters. I moderate. Our Elders and Deacons rotate every three years. Even at our highest level of church government, it is equally comprised of Elders and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who rotate each General Assembly. Presbyterians adopted our polity because we believe we are on a lifelong journey in which there is no escaping reform and that God speaks through each called member!

The doors of Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx tell the story of a congregation who recently experienced reformation. The church doors had been painted red before pastor Neumark's arrival. Each morning Neumark would arrive at church to new graffiti on the church's red doors. After repainting the doors for months Neumark began to see that a new way of dealing with the doors must emerge. Gathering children and teens from the streets for art class and Bible stories, Transfiguration's reformation began literally on their front doors. Painting a mural on the doors with these youth became a labor of joy replacing the despair Neumark faced before! The youth painted their hearts out and people passing by on the street began to show interest in the church. The doors remained graffiti free.

“Reformation on the doors” Neumark wrote in her book *Breathing Spaces*, “has good precedent in our church.” She references Martin Luther’s 95 theses nailed to the church door of Wittenberg on the 31st of October, 1517. God’s reformation reversed Christian notions of privilege and authority through Transfiguration’s doors following a 500-year-old Reformed tradition! Neumark points to the doors of her church, “These young people do not represent an uneducable underclass better off locked away in prison. Created in the image of God they come bearing life.”² Just as God’s word broke through to the people in Germany when Luther called them to take initiative in reforming their church, it broke through in Brooklyn as the people of Transfiguration faced the pain and triumph of their own church’s reformation.

God called Transfiguration Lutheran into further reformation in the ensuing years of Neumark’s pastorate. One Sunday when she was still new, she came back from vacation and unabashedly preached about what a witness to the world it was for the congregation to embrace a paradigm shift of full inclusion of all members united as one at their annual meeting later that morning. Little did Neumark know that while she was out of town some members devised a plan put forward a motion that would divide the growing church into two separate congregations—the new group could rent space from the old members. But the living Word that morning in sermon and sacrament spoke to the congregation. Later that morning they voted to accept all their members as full members of one congregation. This meant reforming a 60-year Hispanic Spanish speaking congregation to include its African-American English speaking new members. Through God’s word they reached the point beyond return. Transfiguration’s doors would be open to everyone.³

Celebrating the Lord’s Supper today is in line with the 16th century reformers’ belief that we come to know the Word through the sacraments just as we do through preaching and the scriptures. We are the church “reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God.” God nourishes us for the journey. God is with us. God is at work in us. We need not fear what God has in store for our continued reformation! Amen

¹ William H. Willimon, “Dispatch from Birmingham: First-year bishop” in *The Christian Century*, Ed. John M. Buchanan, September 20, 2005. Pp. 28-31.

² Heidi B. Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Beacon Press: Boston, Massachusetts, 2003) Pp. 3-12.

³ Neumark, Heidi B. Pp. 29-30