

Tender Care
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Reformation Sunday/ 25th October 2020

The sixteenth century reform of the Church in Europe was a reformation of thought, a reformation of ideas. The reform was driven by the need to read and translate the Bible with new eyes, fresh eyes, which yielded new ideas. These ideas were new for them, but really very old although they had been forgotten or neglected. Martin Luther (1483-1546) said he “rediscovered the gospel” through his encounter with the book of Romans, reading it in the original Greek. The push for reform of the Church was inspired by a rigorous theological engagement of questions pertaining to the authority of scripture: who has the authority to read and interpret scripture? This enormously generative time yielded profound theological reflections on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the nature of grace, the role of faith, the relationship between faith and works, the nature and purpose of the church, and a mind-numbing debate over what happens when Christians gather at the Lord’s table, breaking bread and sharing a cup in remembrance of him. And there were discussions about the nature and purpose of the state, the church’s relationship to the magistrate, the work of the church in the world, the nature of the Christian life, especially the special place given to vocation. This was especially true for John Calvin (1509-1564) and reformed Protestants. To be baptized is to be called by God. Everyone baptized is called by God to use one’s resources, experiences, gifts, faculties and abilities for the glory of God. Yes, it was a heady affair, the Reformation. It was a war of beliefs within the Church. When the Protestants left the Roman Catholic church (or were kicked out of it), the Protestants continued to fight over ideas, and divide over ideas and beliefs, with ensuing heated debates over things we would consider irrelevant.

To view the Reformation as only a war of ideas, an intellectual affair, however, is to miss the impact that the rediscovery of the gospel had upon culture and social structures, the view of women, the reform of liturgy and music, architecture, the arts, education, finance, impacting the daily lives of ordinary women, men, and children in the sixteenth century right to our own. Yes, the Reformation was a revolution of ideas, but these ideas emerged from within the experience of human life and human suffering, human beings searching for meaning and purpose in the face of war, disease, hunger, and poverty, people obsessed with, burdened by the need to be in a positive relationship with God; anxious about life with God in the world to come, but also determined to live with God in the world, “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), people who believed in and trusted God’s sovereign, providential presence ordering human affairs, a living God who gently cares for and provides for all God’s children and calls us to do the same.

I’m grateful that today’s lectionary reading is from 1 Thessalonians. Although, I admit, I’m using this text to point to something not directly related to the text and, therefore, this is not a very Protestant sermon. Instead, I want to draw our attention to is something that Paul says here and suggest why this really is a marvelous text for Reformation Sunday.

What struck me about Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica is just how personal it is, how much he loves the people of this church; they were near and dear to his heart. He reminds them that his ministry with them was always honest and sincere. “As you know and as God is

our witness,” he wrote, “we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or others... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (1 Thess. 2:5-7).

Now, let this image sink in. We don’t often associate this kind of language with Paul. Listen, even *feel* your way into these words: “But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children.” Why? “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8).

It’s a moving, touching expression of love. Yes, Paul and his team were eager to share the good news of God, proclaim the gospel. But they also desired to share their lives—flesh and blood and soul—with these beloved people who had become dear and precious to them. Here is Paul as mother, exercising a maternal influence toward the church. He’s like a nurse tenderly caring for the weak, ill, and vulnerable.¹ Like a mother tenderly caring for her children. Yes, share the gospel. Preach the good news. Theology matters. Beliefs matter. But don’t forget that the Lord shared his life with us and continues to share his life with us. In fact, you can tell when the gospel is enacted and embodied in us: when in love we give our lives to another, when we share our own selves, when we serve, when we give, when we genuinely care for people.

The church has always been most faithful and most effective when it seeks to genuinely care for people, when it reaches out to the lowest and the least and welcomes them into the fold, when it engages in ministries that seek the health, wholeness, and healing of God’s people, when the church provides safety, protection, sanctuary to the vulnerable, to the exile, the refugee, anyone alienated in mind, body, or spirit. We know that the first Christians cared for the sick and the dying. They fed the hungry. They provided protection and safety. Convents, monasteries provided hospitality, shelter, and food. This call to alleviate human suffering has been a constant throughout the history of the church.

Philip Jenkins, contemporary historian of Christianity, argues that the church has been most successful when it engages in ministries of healing; it’s probably the strongest factor pulling or attracting people toward Christianity and into the church, especially in the Two-Thirds World: holistic healing, the healing of the body, the mind, the soul, the spirit, healing the wounds of society.²

It’s a fascinating observation. There was a time when ministers and priests saw themselves as essentially doctors of the soul. I wonder if the decline of the church in the West is related to the fact that the church, for the most part, has set this work aside, we’ve given up seeing ourselves as agents of healing, we’ve handed it over to science or medicine and healthcare professionals—all of whom have done and continue to do amazing work in this area, thank God. But what about us? Perhaps the church, itself, especially in the West, will begin to heal when it reclaims its role as healer, like “a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.”

It’s often forgotten that there was a tender caring side to the Reformation. Consider Geneva, this bastion of the reformed movement in Switzerland. During the Reformation it became known as the “city of refuge,” especially for French Protestants, for Huguenots, forced

to flee persecution. Calvin encouraged those who could not remain in France to defend their faith to go into exile. Soon, thousands began to flee to Geneva and from there into Switzerland and later Germany. The outpouring of compassion and support was a testimony to the power of the gospel. This was especially true in Geneva. Administrative structures were quickly set up to meet the immediate needs of the refugees arriving in the city with physical and emotional and spiritual trauma and anguish. If you, as a refugee arrived at the city gates you were met by the deacons. They welcomed you warmly. They found a place for you to live. Families opened their homes to them. The need was so great that additional stories were built on the top of tenement buildings to accommodate the influx of refugees. Evidence of the building extensions can be seen today in the oldest parts of Geneva. The deacons set up an employment service and found work for everyone able to work. Direct financial assistance was provided. They organized financial support from individual churches in the city and hosted days of prayer. Geneva and Switzerland as a whole welcomed approximately 60,000 reformed Protestants from France, and about 20,000 remained in Geneva. There were challenges, of course, some were troubled by the added social and financial strain of caring for the refugees, but overall, it was a transforming, life-giving experience for Protestant Europe and left its mark on the Reformed/Calvinist tradition in Switzerland, Germany, Scotland, and later here on these shores.³

And this legacy, of course, spread down through the centuries and throughout the world. It continues to be a generative element of Protestantism. We're certainly not alone in this work, of course, but we need to remember it's in our DNA, it's part of our tradition. Tender care. Tenderly caring. Binding up the wounds of the people. Consider all of the hospitals and clinics we have established and continue to support. Right here in Baltimore, Greater Baltimore Medical Center (GBMC), one of the largest and best hospitals in the city, grew out of The Presbyterian Eye, Ear and Throat Charity Hospital, which was originally a clinic that a Civil War surgeon set up in his carriage house in East Baltimore in 1887.

Yes, as Presbyterians, part of the Reformed theological tradition, we are a people reformed and always reforming. But maybe we should also think of ourselves as “cared for and always caring,” or “healed and always healing.” Called to a ministry of reforming and caring and healing the broken, the hurting, the disabled, the suffering, the dying. It's a history, I think, we need to reclaim.

Over the past couple of years in my research in theology and psychology, as well as from my studies at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zürich, I've discovered—to my utter amazement!—that the pioneers of psychology at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Europe, especially in Zürich and Geneva, were Reformed Christians. There were many theorists, such as Théodore Flournoy (1854-1920) in Geneva, as well as Jung (1875-1961), who believed that understanding how and why the psyche suffers and developing methods of psychotherapy, which, of course, means, “healing the soul,” would be of inestimable value to pastors caring for their parishioners.⁴ This connection has been largely forgotten. The practice of pastoral care and counseling emerged out of this desire to tenderly care for the hurting psyche—the human soul. There's a German word that I've come to love: *Seelsorge*. It's sometimes translated as “pastoral care” or “pastor,” but it really means, “one who cares for the soul.”

Tender care. This, too, is a legacy of the Reformed tradition. The work of the church. The work of the church in the world. Needed all the more these days, especially on these shores. In this time surrounded by so much pain and suffering, of death and accumulative grief, as the number of COVID cases continue to rise and as we go into the winter months, which is going to be difficult, it's all the more important for the church to know that it is being called to act, to serve, to support, to provide, to heal. In a time of so much meanness in our public life, brutality of language, harshness, lies, deceptions, selfishness, and fear... followers of Christ can offer tenderness, the church can be tender and vulnerable, nursing all God's children with love and grace and gentleness.

Who is at the gates of the church, of our communities, of our families, the gates of our hearts needing protection and safety? In this time when everything feels tender, where are we being summoned to care? In this time of division and brokenness, where is God calling us to bind up the wounds of the people?

“...we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.”

May it be so.



¹ On the maternal themes in Paul, see Beverley Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

² See Philip Jenkins, *The Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³For the history of the Huguenot refugees see: <https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/le-refuge-huguenot/>.

⁴ On Flournoy see Karima Amer, “The Contribution of Théodore Flournoy to the Discovery of the Unconscious Mind,” *The Independent Scholar*, Vol. 5 (2019). See also Marianne Jehle-Wildberger, ed. *On Theology and Psychology: A Correspondence – Adolf Keller and C. G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). An excellent example of Jung’s engagement pastors and theologians is a lecture given at the Alsatian Pastoral Conference at Strasbourg in May 1932, “Psychologists and the Clergy,” CW 11, pars. 488-538 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). It’s also included in *Jung’s Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), with the inaccurate translation “Psychologists or the Clergy.” See also Martin Liebscher’s chapter “C. G. Jung and the Berneuchen Movement: Meditation and Active Imagination in Jungian Psychotherapy and Protestant Spiritual Practice in the 1930s,” in Pew Davis and Sonu Shamdasani, *Medical Humanity and Inhumanity in the German-Speaking World* (London: University College London Press, 2020). See also works of the Zürich Reformed pastor Oskar Pfister (1873-1956). Heinrich Meng and Ernst L. Freud, eds., *Psychoanalysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).