On this last Sunday in October, we commemorate the Protestant Reformation movement that took place 500 years ago in Europe.

When the reformer Martin Luther nailed the series of protest statements (famously known as *“The 95 Theses”*) on the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517, not only did he boldly unravel the establishment of the church, as he became the “whistle-blower” of the clerical abuses with the sales of indulgences, more importantly he unveiled a whole new understanding of the way one’s salvation is achieved….not by human works or purchases, but through one’s faith and repentance of sins, and a whole of God’s grace. It is God who initiates this process of salvation, not us and we were offered ample opportunities in which we can respond in faith.

This “spiritual awakening” came at a period of divisions and dissention within the church when the corrupt practices of the church were under heavy scrutiny and questioning. Much of the church leadership and its authority were being challenged. It sparked a revival in personal devotion of prayers, reading and interpretation of scripture…going back to the basics, while cutting out the non-essentials that often get in the way between one’s faith and relationship with God. Instead of being told of what they must believe in and how they should think, they were invited to explore and to read God’s word themselves (in the language that everyday people could understand) with the power of the Holy Spirit. This was revolutionary! Never been done before!

**One’s faith was no longer an individual and private act of devotion, but it became communally and corporately expressed.** The whole Protestant Reformation movement was very clear on this. Luther and many of his followers did not seek to cause a schism or fracture from the church, but simply getting back to the basics and becoming whole and purer church instead.

The Apostle Paul summed up the core of our Christian faith and the message of the Gospel in two simple verses, when he wrote to the early church in Ephesus. He wrote ***“for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*** **It’s all about God and NEVER about us.**

In the scripture that we read earlier, we read about another man of faith and courage…but this time through a tax-collector named Zacchaeus, who was probably one of the most disliked persons in the region not only because he worked for the Roman government but he cheated off the people by collecting more than what was required, as part of his pay. Zacchaeus was like the head of the IRS. Ironically his name in Hebrew means “pure”, “clean” or “innocent”. He scammed people their money, that’s what he did. Nobody liked him as you would imagine.

But when Zacchaeus heard that Jesus coming through town, he too wanted to catch a glimpse of him? But there was one problem, how? He was physically too short to see through the crowd, so Zacchaeus decided to climb up a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. Now you got to remember that Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, the last place you would expect to find him would be up on a tree, but he had no other option. Perhaps he was hiding from the unfriendly crowd as well, we would never know. The truth is, Zacchaeus never let his physical limitation or his unpopularity discourage him from seeking the truth and catching a glimpse of who this Jesus was!

As Jesus came through town, not only did he picked Zacchaeus out of the crowd off the tree, he also told him that he would stay over at his house that night. Well, that was certainly NOT what Zacchaeus had in mind and definitely raised some eyebrows among the crowd and other religious leaders who were scrutinizing every move of Jesus. Why…of all people would Jesus want to hang out and stay over at the chief tax-collector’s house? Doesn’t he know who this man was? What was Jesus thinking?

There’s a lot that we can analyze out of this event and what implication it may have upon us today. For one, like what we’ve talked about a couple of weeks ago about the tiny mustard seed of faith, God was able to use those who demonstrate faith in order to do God’s work…as long as we allow that faith to work in us. Yes, even a sinner’s faith is worthy in God’s sight.

Zacchaeus had all the power, influence, and wealth to advance his own social and political status, but what it came down to at the end, was his personal faith and conviction that ultimately led him to Christ.

**It was his faith that propelled Zacchaeus to follow the Spirit’s leading into actions and repentance of his sins. It was his faith that led him to the Son of Man who came to seek out and to save those who were lost.[[2]](#footnote-2)** Instead of being labelled and ostracized as a villain by his community, the short statured Zacchaeus was uplifted by Jesus and recognized as a model of faith in spite of all challenges and against all odds.

This week, we also celebrate another holiday on the church calendar. No, it’s not Halloween. It’s *All Saint’s Day* on 11/1. It is a day in which we remember those who have “*fought their fight, finished their race and have kept their faith*.” We honor many of the saints for the countless sacrifices that they have made. Some even paid the ultimate price with their lives because of their faith and conviction. Their lifelong commitment and faithfulness continue to inspire many who are seeking to honor their legacy in the past, the present, as well as in the future.

As Presbyterian, we take great pride of being ***“a church that is reformed and always to be reformed”***. This challenges us to a movement of progress and a season of renewal. Bear in mind that the word **“reform” does not necessarily mean bringing in new changes or new ideas constantly, but rather a sense of refocusing on what God wants us to do and not what we humanly desire.**

However, we must never forget that there is a second part to that motto, ***“according to the Word of God and the calling (or the leading) of the Holy Spirit”.*** To me, I think the latter part is more critical than the beginning. It clarified both the direction (as well as the Director!) of the church's reform. The direction of reform shall be **“according to the Word of God**” and the director of such reform shall be the **Holy Spirit and not us**.

Edward Dowey, a church historian, once wrote about what does a church that is “reformed” mean. Dowey wrote, “*reform is the institutional counterpart of repentance. Recognizing how far short we fall from God's intentions, we continually submit all doctrines and structures to be reformed according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. The church is a frail and fallible pilgrim people, a people on the way, not yet what we shall be. The church, because of who we are, remains open to always being reformed. Reform has a backward and a forward reference. It leads not only back to the Bible but also forward under the Word." [[3]](#footnote-3)*

Like Zacchaeus, the early church reformers confessed that we as human and as the church have fallen out of God’s grace. We’ve dishonored God’s calling. We’ve missed our missional purpose and have lost our vision and hope for our future. We’ve focused more inwardly upon ourselves instead of looking out for the needs of others. We’ve trusted own judgement and personal interests instead of working towards peace submissively following the leading of the Holy Spirit. **Not only is the church in need of reform, WE ourselves are also in need of such reform as well, as we examine our own lives and our practices as being God’s living presence here on earth.**

In her article entitled *“What do Presbyterians believe about “a church reformed and always being reforming”,* Dr. Anna Case-Winters, of McCormick Theological Seminary wrote, *“the backward and forward reference of reform invites us on the one hand to attend respectfully to the wisdom and Scriptural interpretations of those who have gone before us with humility. On the other hand, it pushes us to do more than simply reiterate what fathers and mothers in the faith have said.*

*Rather, we must do in our day what they did in theirs,* ***worship and serve the living God****. Therefore, while we honor the forms of faith and life that have been bequeathed to us, we honor them best in a spirit of openness to the Word and the Spirit that formed and continue to re-form the church. The church, because of who God is, a living God, remains open to always being reformed.* [[4]](#footnote-4)

Zacchaeus knew that his life wasn’t perfect and that he has done great harms to others. He repented and confessed his willingness to seek reconciliation with God and with others. Zacchaeus opened his heart and allowed himself to be changed by God. He might be “**short in stature, but he was certainly tall in his faith**”.

Each of us have been called into faith to be “saints” of this world. Saints not because we are “special” or more righteous or holier than others, but as ones who are **set apart** and **dedicated** to participate in God’s ministry here on earth. This is God’s mission frontier for us right here in Brooklyn, and right now in the year 2016. You and I are part of this transformation as we live out what it means to be ***“reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”***

**THIS** is the kind of faith that would bear much fruits for God’s kingdom. **THIS** is the kind of faith that we, as “saints” of God must seek in gratitude and in hope. Thanks be to God. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Ephesians 2:8-9* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Luke 19:10* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Case-Winters, Anna, *What do Presbyterians believe about ‘Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda? May, 2004 Presbyterian Today http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/reformed/*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Case-Winters, Anna, *What do Presbyterians believe about ‘Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda? May, 2004 Presbyterian Today,* *http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/reformed/*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)