

A Radical Reformation

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First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READING

A reading from Martin Luther, 1521

SERMON

It was surely a long family tradition –
a recipe passed down
from great great great grandma
to great great grandma, to great grandma,
to just – good old grandma –
who was still great to me.

Who knows –
maybe the recipe travelled across the ocean
inside a trunk that got lost over the years
and was rediscovered in an attic
and found again – just waiting
right there on the page - to be made, to come to life again.

Whatever the story was, I wanted to know it –
how this Swedish Kringla –
this simple pastry in a figure 8 –
not too sweet, of course,
lest we be indulgent –
but warm and homey and familiar –
a dough that coats your soul
like a quilt filled with family stories.

So, I asked –
“Grandma, do you could teach me to make Kringla,
the kind you always had at your house in Story City before you moved –
I would love to learn how
and how you learned to make it.”

She paused. “Well, sure, I suppose we could try.”

I was a bit surprised by her choosing the word, “try.”

“I have just never made a good batch – it always fell apart or was overdone or dry,
I would always overmix or under-mix or couldn’t get the ends to stick together...”

“But Grandma – it was always at the house in Story City.”

“That’s true – and you know why? Story City has a Swedish bakery.”

So what I learned from grandma –
baking is hard.

Even if it sounds easy:

*A stick of butter, a cup and a half of sugar
an egg, a teaspoon of vanilla
¾ cup flour and 1 teaspoon baking powder, ¼ teaspoon salt
1 cup buttermilk and 1 teaspoon baking soda stirred in
(Add the baking soda to buttermilk when butter/sugar are mixing)*

*Add 3 cups flour, gradually, and mix. Cover. Chill overnight
Cut into small squares, roll into lines, shape into figure 8s –
bake at 375 for 10-11 minutes until golden brown.
At least, that works for our oven (the recipe says)*

And for years it has worked, but you know –
you know –
there are nuances that bakers have used –
its dependent
on the oven
and the humidity in the room
and the time of year
and the different ways hands press the dough together
because of changes in strength or the stress of the day -
and the height of the rack and the dampness of the cloth -
and how much flour, measured in the palm –
and how even the lines are rolled.

It takes time and skill and patience
to form, and reform the dough,
to make it just right, in every new context
taking into consideration the little changes all around you...

Sometimes, stories come down
pass through, and I'm not joking – *Story City* –
and things morph and times change
and context shifts
and we make our way in a changed and changing world –
with our changed and changing selves –
always unfolding, never finished –
always *on the way, on the road*
toward a life that is always in a process of becoming.

Poet Stanley Kunitz writes it this way,

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being abides,
from which I struggle not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites, over which scavenger angels wheel on
heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends, those who fell along the way, bitterly stings
my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage, a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

I am not done, he writes, *with my changes*.

I am not done
roaming through the wreckage
and deciphering and doubting the next chapter
in my book of transformations.

Where one story ends and another begins,
another generation,
or the same person or place in just another moment in time,
pick up where the story where it was left off
and add in their own approach,
shifting, ever so slightly, over time and practice,
how things are done
what seems right and normative –
and we live in the layers of who we are
who we have been
and who we are yet to become –
forming and re-forming our lives,
our stories – those recipes
of how to live and breathe and bake
from one heart to another.

Ecclesia semper reformanda est

wrote theologian Karl Barth reflecting on the work of Augustine – the central
influence in to the life and teachings of protestant reformer Martin Luther.

*Ecclesia semper reformanda est –
the church must always be reforming.*

500 years ago this past Wednesday,
Luther walked up to the Castle Church at Wittenburg, Germany,
where he was a professor of the Hebrew Bible,
and, the story goes – nailed his 95 theses –
his 95 beliefs about how the church must change –
right into the door.

But you know what – that’s not exactly what happened.
Because when future generations spoke of the impact of that moment,
the story, like any fish story in Minnesota, expanded beyond reality –
there was no hammer, no nail, no dramatic moment –
it was not meant to start a revolution, or a re-formation,
but a regular practice of the day – academic debate, among scholars,
on current practices in the church.

Think more of a bulletin board inviting people to a discussion –
but, granted, the hammer and the nail –
that’s a good story.

The impact of the writings, however, were significant –
and we join with every tradition whose roots are traced back to the reformation
by noticing and naming the legacy that the movement that was started
500 years ago has on our religious life today..

Unitarianism and Universalism were born out of the reformation –
in particular, the radical fringe that grew out of the reformation -
a time in which stronghold practices of the church
were being questioned and challenged,
and our traditions trace its roots back to the reformers spirit –
both in content and practice.

Much of the beliefs of the reformation would be highly questionable today
among religious liberals, and perhaps especially Unitarian Universalists,
but there are major teachings within the reformation
that we still practice and believe –
that have been formed and reformed
into what we know as our religious tradition here and now.

***Radical Reformation teaching #1 –
the condemnation of the treasury of merit and the selling of indulgences.***

or – in other words

a critique of the church's practice that encouraged people to pay away their sins and reduce, through a convenient payment plan, their time in eternal fire and damnation.

A marketing phrase from church leader Johann Tetzel in Luther's day was,
As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs.

This is the theme for this year's pledge campaign here at First Church (not!).

Luther's rebuttal was *simul Justus et peccator – and sola gratia*

or – in other words –

a person is, at the same time they are a sinner, they are also a saint –
and it is through grace alone, not through buying or proving your worth,
that you are named and known as beloved, as accepted, as you are.

The radical reformation rebuttal to the selling of indulgences
was the idea of Grace –

the namesake of this congregation for many years

as *Grace Church* here in Rochester,

celebrating the Universalist message that all people are beloved,
even as they are imperfect –

that you can't buy or earn your worth, your dignity –

that you are beloved, as you are,

imperfect and fallible and human –

that your worth and your dignity

is inherent, intrinsic –

you can't earn it –

you're born with it.

Like the reading that Beth shared with us this morning –

*each hair, and trespass it held,
fell like pigeon feathers on the floor –*

*swept away at the end of the day;
not saved by the pain of the cutting,
but by its graceful release*

*drawing attention away from wrong doing
toward the newly made face.*

This change in foundation,
that all was not, as Luther wrote –
*health but healing –
on the way toward wholeness –
a process of always becoming*

this belief roots a community, a church, a person,
in foundations of grace –
of graceful and ease in movement of the soul
that is not tangled up in guilt and shame –
but honestly and openly naming and knowing shortcomings,
and at the same time
knowing that our worth and dignity
are not dependent on them –
that frees up a shame-filled soul
to a lightness
that allows for more joy,
more compassion for others,
more gratitude for the beauty of the world
that draws one out of focus on the self
to the focus on the whole –

if your time is tangled up
trying to make up for being human,
you see the good in more people,
and you reach out, beyond the self, in service and in love.

***Radical Reformation teaching #2 –
the priesthood of all believers***

or – in other words –
the belief that all people, regardless of class and status,
had worth and dignity in their work and in their living.

Luther wrote a treatise in 1520, shortly after the 95 theses, entitled, *to the Christian nobility*. I shared a little of this on labor day – here is an excerpt:

... there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status.

They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do...

...A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of [their] trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated...many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community...

The radical reformation rebuttal
to the nobility of those leading the church
was the lift up the dignity of all people –
a deeply Universalist belief –
that beyond status and occupation, identity in the community –
as John Updike writes,
*In church we are given our real value, the soul-unit of one,
with its nominal arithmetic of equality: one equals one.*

And a 3rd teaching of the radical reformation, as the natural outcome of these first two – that you don't have to spend your life in fear for your soul, and that all people have value and worth – the 3rd teaching is – love your neighbor.

That teaching goes much further back,
but the reformers cast it in a different key in light of a corrupt church,
picking the pocket of the poor
and driving the gap between the elite and the peasants further and further.

Luther said, *you are a free person, subject to nobody; and at the same time, you are a dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone* –

or – in other words –

because you are beloved,
and because all people are beloved –
you don't have to prove your worth to anyone,
and your calling in this world
is to serve and love you neighbor
for the well-being and the health and the flourishing of the community –
because we live in a network of mutuality.

And the core teaching,
that 500 years later,
Unitarian Universalism still draws on from the reformation -

Ecclesia semper reformanda est
The Church must always be reforming...

That's what we are about –
not change just because we are uncomfortable
with past teachings, or certain words, or practices –
not change just for the sake of change.

But we are given a recipe
for how to live a life of meaning, and ethics, and justice,
and we adapt and change it over time –
the spirit stays alive,
as the story changes –
as we add a pinch of this, and a teaspoon of that,
adjust the temperature
and we feel it in our hands
and we feel in our hearts and bodies
and lived experience,
and we know
that what worked in a different time,
in a different context,
with different hands –

the dough just doesn't rise, or stretch, or form the same anymore –
so we take what we have been given,
and we find our own finesse –
and we form, and reform, and reform again
the stories and words and teachings
to find what works
what sets just right
for something that still
smells and tastes like home.

*I have walked through many lives, the poet says
I look behind to gather strength for where I'm going –
I live in the layers.*

We are a layered people – as individuals, as a church, as a tradition.
And it is true there is a lot of litter along the way –
a lot to disparage and critique and hate on –
and a lot that we can dust off and find again
and see, just wonder, if it can still sing – even if in a new key.

We are layered people –
like the opening hymn today –
a tune that originated in the time of the reformation,
then words written a hundred years later,
then words written 300 years later,
up until words written
about the mission of this very church, right now.

The hymn we'll sing in a moment,
to a tune written by Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress* –
is set to new words,
reminding us of how the earth itself
lives in us –
and so to do the stories of our history,
and the stories of our people –
they live in the air we breathe, the words we use,
and in the words of the closing Stanza –
Our day is just beginning.

Ken Untener writes,

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is a way of saying that perfection always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

*This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for grace to enter and do the rest.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

We live in layers –
different harmonies and tunes,
changing words and meanings and images –
adjusting the recipe,
forming and reforming the dough,
forming and always re-forming our lives -
that connect us back to who we have been,
our many and varied stories –
and draws us forward
to who we might yet be.

The question is not
what can we learn from the reformation?

The question is
in what ways
am I re-forming that which has been handed down to me
and what, from the recipe I'm writing now myself,
with not only every ingredient of this and that,
every direction of time and temperature
every extra tip of handling and care –
what is just now,
with new words in the old tune
just now possible -
just now on the brink of becoming?