

Reformation

Sermon notes for the sermon

Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young

On Sunday, October 30, 2011

Many years ago I remember my father being upset because a neighbor was installing a fence around their property. My dad was bothered because the fence obstructed his view; it cut off what was otherwise a clear view of the peaceful neighborhood in which my parent's lived. My dad did not like fences because they created barriers that appeared to close in and interrupt the expanse of God's beautiful creation. Please do not get me wrong, my dad appreciated the safety the fences offered to those with small children or with a swimming pool in the back yard. He also appreciated the fact that a neighbor's fence kept the neighbor's dog in their yard and not his. Dad understood the use and need of fences he just did not like the feeling of being penned in.

Sometimes excessive rules and regulations leave us feeling penned in. Have you ever had a doctor say to you that you must have several days or weeks of bed rest? Or, have you ever had a major injury or illness that kept you from doing all the things that make your life full and meaningful? Maybe you have spent time in jail and know exactly what it means to be penned in. Most of us at some point in our lives have our wings clipped for a while or for a long time and we know what it means to be cut off from those we love to spend our days with and from

the work or tasks that bring meaning to our daily living. It is bad enough when this happens to us by circumstances in life or the bad choices that we may have made. It is much worse when we feel left out and not included by the choice of others.

Jesus embodied the perspective that a true and deepening relationship with God does not make us better than other people, offering us a position of privilege in God's eyes. Rather, such a relationship with God places on us a greater responsibility to live our lives in such a way that others are invited and encouraged to do the same. The Pharisees and Sadducees both believed that their practice of piety set them over and above others in God's eyes. In a sense they believed that they had such a special relationship with God that could only be maintained by insulating themselves from the rest of humanity. Jesus, through his teaching and his ministry, sought to reform the good, religious people of his day. He sought to break down the pietistic walls that had been erected by the religious leaders of the Jews so that bridges could be built instead.

Throughout the history of the church there have been movements that sought to reform the church so that it would embody its mission of creating disciples of Jesus Christ. Some reform movements, such as the crusades, stand as an embarrassment for us; while others, such as the reforms of Martin Luther and the Wesleys, inspire us and capture our imaginations. Sometimes reform movements develop over the fact that the church has become inward focused living within the walls of doctrine and piety. Other times reform movements

have developed over theological differences or biblical interpretation. When the church becomes a bureaucracy, an institution that perpetuates itself with no thought or consideration for mission, it finds itself in need of reformation.

This past Thursday evening I attended a public meeting that was called by the mayor of New Brunswick concerning the recent shooting by a police officer of one of the citizens of this city. As I watched and listened I became aware that the perspective of the people gathered for the meeting was that the mayor seemed to care more for the bureaucracy of city government than for the people of the city. While I do not share that perspective and have actually found mayor Cahill to care deeply for the citizens he serves, the fact remains that there are those in this city who believe that the walls of bureaucracy are keeping them from being heard, respected and cared for. God forbid that anyone should say that about the church; yet, throughout the ages it has been said and reform movements have sought to bring change to the life of Christ that we share as a community. If the maintenance of the status quo becomes the reason for our existence then we have become idolaters, worshipping and maintaining a bureaucracy instead of God.

I once heard the story of two little boys who were walking past a church one day. One of the boys pointed to the church building and said, "Look, that's where Jesus lives." Without missing a beat the other boy said, "No, that's not where Jesus lives; that's just a church." When the outside world looks at us do they see

Jesus or do they see just another building taking up space in the middle of the city?