

WGUMC October 15, 2017 Matthew 6:5-13  
"Spirit and Structure: The English Reformation"

When the Episcopal Church elected Gene Robinson to be its first gay bishop in 2003, a letter to the editor of the Los Angeles Times said this:

The actions taken by the New Hampshire Episcopalians are an affront to Christians everywhere. I am just thankful that the church's founder, Henry VIII, and his wife Catherine of Aragon, his wife Anne Boleyn, his wife Jane Seymour, his wife Anne of Cleves, his wife Katherine Howard, and his wife Catherine Parr are no longer here to suffer through this assault on our "traditional Christian marriage." [*Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2003]

We have long joked about the English Reformation. Would it ever have happened if Henry VIII hadn't wanted a divorce or the pope had agreed to give him one? Henry's six wives just don't stand up to Luther's 95 theses!

It is commonly thought that the Reformation in England began when Henry declared himself, and not the pope, the head of the Church in England, but the English Reformation was not just a political power grab. It was a real reformation, even if it didn't follow the European pattern.

It's a fascinating story, one that was shaped as much or even more by Henry's daughter, Elizabeth, as by Henry himself. It was really Queen Elizabeth I who charted the Middle Way, a path that distinguishes English Protestants from their counterparts in Germany and Switzerland. The "Middle Way" is a term we use to describe how the Church of England fell somewhere between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans and Calvinists. Elizabeth didn't want any radical reform in her England. She didn't trust the Puritans any more than she trusted the pope.

So under Elizabeth's leadership, the Church of England stitched together a religious identity that was Protestant in

some important principles but fairly Catholic in everyday practice.

England's clergy hoped that by keeping to the middle of the road, they could keep the country from falling apart. And the primary way they did that was through *The Book of Common Prayer*, which was published by The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. (By the way, Cranmer was later martyred by Henry's other daughter, Queen Mary or "Bloody Mary," who reinstated Catholicism during her short reign.)

*The Book of Common Prayer* gave English Protestants an order of worship and a collection of prayers that everyone had to use. So you could say that, though people differed in their politics, social position and regional preferences, they were all united in their prayer.

If you think this was unfortunate because it forced everyone into one liturgical straightjacket, consider this: Thomas Cranmer and the English reformers were just doing

what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount when he was teaching his disciples to pray. Jesus knew that his disciples were going to be at a loss when he left them. What could keep them together when they came together? Today, Christians all over the world pray "The Lord's Prayer."

Jesus said that there is no need to heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles or as preachers do who like to be heard for their many words. Just this simple prayer will do, for there is not a situation that this one prayer doesn't directly speak to.

But doesn't a rote prayer stifle real, honest prayer? I know a lot of people who think that prayer that is not extemporaneous is not really from the heart. But what the English Reformation can teach us is that written prayers and a set order of worship every Sunday does not have to suffocate the Spirit. C.S. Lewis, author of the Narnia series and many books on Christianity, once wrote this about worship:

"Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or

adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it 'works' best—when, through long familiarity, we don't have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice...The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God." [from Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer]

Here's an argument for doing the same thing Sunday after Sunday: so we can create a container for worship that we don't have to think about or fuss over, a space that, if given a chance, God will move into. This is one of the great functions of our coming together and reading the same old Scriptures, singing the same old songs and praying together the same old prayers. It's called liturgy, which literally means "the work of the people." It's people working to build a solid structure that the Spirit can blow through.

Think of a wind turbine. It is tall and strong and anchored to the ground so it doesn't topple over. Likewise, the best liturgy is strong and anchored to a tradition that doesn't change every time the culture shifts. Just as the turbine, by

being fixed in one place, can catch the energy of the wind and power our homes, liturgy can catch the energy of God's Spirit and power our lives.

So having structure in worship doesn't stifle God's Spirit. Rather, it channels it, which is something I really appreciate about traditional hymns and prayers. But our tradition does something else very important, too.

If liturgy can channel God's Spirit, it can also provide us some protection against evil spirits, or whatever it is that has been haunting us this whole year. Daily there are new dangers to worry about. Weekly, there are new disasters, and we are feeling a mixture of disturbed, dazed, and defenseless.

The news from up north has really hit home for me. The fires in Sonoma and Napa Counties broke out on the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire at Grace UMC in Santa Cruz. It was a Saturday night back in 2000, and I had just put the sermon to bed. It was about 10:40 when the phone rang. It was one of

my parishioners calling to tell me that the church was on fire. I threw on some clothes and hopped into the car, leaving Hank with our 4-month-old. As I backed out of the driveway, I could see in my rearview mirror flame-tinted sky.

It was an awesome fire. The old church built out of redwood timbers burned for a long time. For four hours, I stood on the sidewalk with half of Santa Cruz watching the fire eat away at history and memory.

The next day, Sunday, we met for worship in the education building next door that didn't burn. I had prepared a sermon on part of the Apostles' Creed (the part that goes "...and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord), but I didn't preach it that day or the next Sunday. The days immediately after the fire were filled with trying to secure the property, count the cost, and measure the loss. Everything was gone: the stained glass windows, shattered; the pipes of the old tracker organ, melted; the marble baptismal font, blackened.

The only thing that survived in the sanctuary was a glass case that held two old Bibles. And I think of the passage in Isaiah, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." [Isaiah 40:8]

Then, on the third Sunday after the fire, I returned to the Apostles' Creed and kept preaching on it as the weeks and months went by, because it dawned on me that what we needed most was something much older and more lasting than a church building. Fire can burn away just about everything, but it can't destroy our faith, not if we are standing on a firm foundation. Christ is that foundation. So when we are really hurting, he speaks to us through the familiar sounds and rhythms of tradition. When the Bible is read, creeds are recited, hymns are sung and prayers are offered, we stand on the rock of ages and draw strength from the faith of our mothers and fathers.



Tradition can be a life-saving prescription for those of us who live in Silicon Valley, where we are always chasing after the next new thing and what is here today is gone in twenty minutes. So here's a thank you to the English Reformation for giving us a resilient structure that can capture the Spirit and lift our spirits.

One of the surprising things that I discovered in Santa Cruz—once we stopped talking about the fire and started talking about the future—was that our young people were the ones who wanted to rebuild the church exactly the way it used to be. They had lost the only spiritual home they ever knew. They were traumatized and were trying to hang onto tradition. So as the bulldozers came to knock down what was left of the sanctuary, I had to keep telling them that tradition lives on in hearts of faith, not in buildings.

If there is anything we can offer the victims of the fires in the North Bay, it is our faith expressed in our common prayer

offered to our uncommonly wise and loving God, who in the words of the great English hymnwriter Isaac Watts, is "our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."