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Grant Us Courage
A sermon for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation
October 29, 2017
Scriptures: Amos 5:18-24 and Ephesians 2:1-10

There's a wonderful old story by Hans Christian Anderson, The Emperor's New Clothes. You've surely heard it before, but let's remember it together. There's an emperor whose one great passion in life is to wear new clothes and show them off in front of his subjects. One day, some con men come along pretending to be weavers. They manage to convince the emperor that they are going to make him a new suit made out of magnificent, expensive cloth which they will weave just for him, but there's just one catch. The cloth will be invisible to people who are unfit for their positions and/or hopelessly stupid. The emperor and his advisors are excited about this, thinking they can use the new clothes to see who in the empire is truly fit for their job.

The weavers get to work, and neither the emperor nor any of his advisors can see anything at all on the looms, but they don't dare admit it for fear of looking incompetent. They all join together in exclaiming over how beautiful the cloth is. Finally, the suit is finished, and the emperor has no choice but to allow the weavers to pretend to dress him in it, and to process down the street buck-naked in front of everybody. The people go along with it, scared of what others would think if they admitted they couldn't see anything. Finally a little child pipes up and says, "But he's not wearing anything!" This frees everyone else to see the truth. Even the emperor himself knows he's not wearing anything, though the procession continues.

Today we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. The Reformation was a process that took many years—it didn't happen all in one day on October 31, 1517. What did happen that day is that Martin Luther posted his 95 criticisms on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He took a public stand and said something that had to be said,

namely, that the whole practice of the church selling indulgences was total crap, to use a theological term. Indulgences were certificates that you could buy from the church. These would reduce the amount of time you spent in purgatory, which in the Catholic Church is a place you go after you die to be purified of your sins before entering heaven. Luther said, that's not biblical. As we just heard in our reading from Ephesians, we are saved by God's grace—we do not earn it, and we certainly can't purchase it by buying certificates from the church. People didn't know that, because they hadn't been taught, and they couldn't read it for themselves because they didn't have Bibles in their own languages, which we talked about a couple weeks ago.

Just imagine for a moment making the switch in your mind from doing good works in order to EARN salvation to doing good works in response to the GIFT of salvation. No wonder the Reformation spread so quickly and so widely (and it must be pointed out that the Catholic Church today does not sell indulgences).

Luther took a stand, and he also took a huge risk. More than once, Luther's life was in danger. If you were a leader of the Catholic Church at that time, and you had all this money coming in from the sale of indulgences, and somebody came along and made a pretty persuasive case for ending it, you might not feel very friendly towards the people responsible. Many of those who protested the abuses of the Catholic Church suffered and died, sometimes really gruesome deaths from beheading or burning at the stake, because they took a stand for what they believed and would not back down. Presbyterian churches like ours owe their existence to the courage of those early Reformers.

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation challenges us to look at our own lives and ask the question, "When and for what have I stood up and spoken out?" You may have noticed that

Pat and I spent the month of September preaching about unity. It's a core value that is badly needed today, and we talked about it at length, urging and encouraging the kind of actions that build unity in the body of Christ. But sometimes, our faith calls us to take a stand, even at the risk of rupture and separation. For Martin Luther, the abuses and corruption of the Catholic church made the early to mid-16th century one of those times.

For the prophet Amos, the 8th century B.C.E. in the land of Israel was one of those times. Things were relatively peaceful and prosperous, but the prosperity was more and more confined to the people at the top. Amos spoke out in the name of God against a society that took advantage of the poor and ignored their needs and cries for help. In the translation I was reading yesterday, the new Common English Bible, I noticed that the caption over the section of Amos that I read to you earlier is titled, "A Statement of Divine Disgust." Amos, the shepherd from a little town called Tekoa, has the nerve to come to the big city and tell the leaders that God is disgusted with them. Amos took a stand and said, "It doesn't matter how theologically correct and well done your worship services are if they don't result in compassion for the poor and vulnerable, and an active commitment to justice." That cannot have been easy to say or easy to hear. You can just imagine how we would feel if someone came and said that God hated the wonderful Hymn Fest that we enjoyed several weeks ago. Or that our elegant sanctuary, beautiful music, and creative children's sermons were disgusting.

Speaking of the prophet Amos, I was at an Adult Education team meeting earlier this month, and we were talking about topics for new classes for 2018. One of our members spoke up and said, "Where are all the prophets today? We need prophets RIGHT NOW!" Whereupon one of our other members, promptly replied, "Well, only if they tell us what we want to hear."

Made me think of the time a month or so ago that my 17-year-old came into the kitchen to throw something away. She opened the trash can and said, “WHAT IS THAT!” I said, “What?” hoping it wasn’t a mouse or a giant roach or something. Turned out to be an empty water bottle. Rachel was furious because she feels strongly we need to be recycling. She has put out a container for that very purpose, but we do not have curbside recycling out in the country. Sometimes the container gets full before I get the chance to take it to town, and so I got lazy and just chucked stuff in the trash, and Rachel called me out. She wanted me to broaden my narrow, self-centered concern for the cleanliness of my own home to concern for the whole planet . . .the home for all living things . . . and I needed the jolt of her anger and passionate commitment for the environment, even if I didn’t want to hear it.

So I think for me the 500th anniversary of the Reformation prompts us pay close attention to three things.

First, pay attention to the protesters, both the ones we like and the ones we don’t like. What’s motivating them? What’s really going on? Who are they standing up for in their protests, and who are they ignoring? Is it possible that they are saying something that we need to hear? Is there a prophetic word for us in their message?

Second, what are the things that really matter to you? When’s the last time you took a stand, and what was it for? (If you participate in a Bible Study or a small group, it might make a great discussion question). For some of you this will be an easy question, but this was a hard one for me, because I’ve been so focused these past couple years on peacemaking and trying to keep everybody together. It’s a good question to help us figure out if we’re really living out God’s priorities or something else. If we haven’t stood up for something big in a while, what’s stopping us?

Third, how might God be calling each of us to live more courageously? Do you see something unjust that keeps nagging at you, but you haven't acted on it yet? Maybe you can't get the recent news stories of human trafficking out of your head . . . maybe there's something not right going on at work . . . maybe you owe someone an apology or you need to have a difficult conversation with someone, but find yourself coming up with all these terrific reasons why today isn't the day. In this Year of the Neighbor, I wonder if there might be someone in our neighborhood who needs us to courageously reach out and make the first move in building a friendship. Pay attention to the things that keep coming up, that you keep avoiding. And then remember Joshua 1:9, "Be strong and very courageous. Don't be alarmed or terrified, because the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." If nothing else, I hope that being part of this church family gives you a sense of courage and reminds you that you are not alone, that there are people here who would be honored to walk with you as you face things that are frightening and difficult. If you want some help getting connected with people like that, please talk with me or Pat or Ali or one of our Stephen Leaders.

We have Bibles translated into English in our pews today . . . we have many people here with a parent or grandparent who was or is a minister . . . we have men and women in the pulpit, in the choir, on our session, and on our board of deacons, all because of the courage of people who have gone before us. We can worship just like this, with Bibles and bagpipes, because of the courage of men and women who fought for this country. Courage will help this church share God's love from the heart of Topeka like never before. May the God who so graciously gives us all that we need and more, also grant us courage.