

Reforming and Reconciling

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

October 30, 2022, Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints Day Sunday,

Reformation and Reconciliation Sunday

Psalm 32; Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5:21-24; Luke 19:1-10

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints Day Sunday and Reformation and Reconciliation Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

All Saints Day goes back over a thousand years as a day to remember and celebrate good people and Reformation Sunday goes back five hundred years to the day Martin Luther nailed his revolutionary, liberating ideas to the church door. Reconciliation has been added to today's celebrations more recently with the awareness that we are truly one with all people and all the earth, and we need to reconcile and live that way.

The word "saint" means everyone who tries to follow the sacred way and live a virtuous and loving life, with acts of compassion and kindness—anyone who shows the spirit of Jesus whatever their spiritual tradition, and that includes most people we know.

Part of our calling as everyday saints and as a church is to keep reforming and reconciling, seeking to be better people and create a better community and world. We do that every Sunday by extending our care and support to all, especially to those we know least well and those we know are having a hard time.

Please be sure that no one feels left out of this loving community today, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Many in our congregation struggle with scriptures and hymns that do not reflect our views of how the universe works or what is good and right.

Today we will be singing two hymns that could fall into those categories. Maybe someday we will reform and drop these hymns, but those of us who grew up with them would feel the loss. I associate them with my parents and the spirit of fighting for what is right that they passed on to me.

I believe violence goes completely against the teachings of Jesus, I believe in Gandhian nonviolence, so when I sing these I have my simultaneous translator working to make them fit my

beliefs, and then some of the messages go right to my heart and encourage and inspire me. I hope something similar happens for you, but if not, feel free to urge us to reform and reconcile!

Let us worship together, each opening to that Spirit that unites us and guides, empowers and comforts us all...

Children's Time: Tomorrow is October 31st. Everyone knows what special day it is, right? Halloween is what you are supposed to say. And I am supposed to say, as a pastor, No, not Halloween. All Hallows Eve—the Eve of All Hallows Day or All Saints Day, which is the day after Halloween.

You see, long before the church existed, October 31st was a holiday similar to our modern celebration of Halloween. People believed that ghosts could come out of their graves and devils and witches would fly around and people wore masks and had spooky parties.

But the church thought this was silly, so the church said OK November first will be All Hallows or Saints Day when we remember all the saints of the church, living and dead, and then All Hallows Eve will be all about saints instead of ghosts and devils, and we'll all go to church instead of going to parties or trick-or-treating.

It hasn't worked too well. Not many people dress up like saints on Halloween. But underneath our masks and costumes, almost everyone *is* a saint, because in its original use saint means everyone who is trying to be loving and kind, trying to help people get along with one another and treat the earth and all its creatures with compassion and respect, people who give unselfishly to help those in need, people who stand up for what is right.

"Saint" includes most of the people we see around us, but sometimes in the news or social media it seems that there are more scary monsters in the world than nice, kind saints, so it's good to take time around All Saints Day to remember people who have been models for us of how to be loving and good.

I invite you now to name saints like that, either ones you know or ones you just know about—people in this congregation or anywhere in the world of any spiritual tradition whom you would call a saint, and give a reason or two why...

In their honor, let us pray the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer from the card in your pew or the screenshare—because prayer was so often the answer to the questions saints faced....

Reforming and Reconciling

Amos and Micah were both working class, rural people and their books are lumped together with what is known as the Twelve Minor Prophets, but these passages are not minor, they are mighty, and they are among the best known and loved in world literature:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

Amos and Micah were people like us, responding to a world gone wrong by doing what saints have always been called to do, speaking truth to power, seeking to reform social systems that are no longer working and reconcile a wayward society with the sacred way.

This is our calling today in a world of war and warming and much wrong, so it is important to notice some things about how Amos and Micah worked.

They both followed the wisdom of the Taoist saying, “No peace in the world without peace in the nation, no peace in the nation without peace in the town, no peace in the town without peace in the home, no peace in the home without peace in the heart.”

When we think like a saint we see that the personal is political. We see that it is important to live what we believe and try to be the change we wish to see in the world, and that requires a continuous process of being honest about ways in which we need to reform and reconcile our own lives.

Remember the story of the monk from Mount Athos where the monks are known for mystical experiences and miracles. When asked what they did there, the monk paused and then said, “We fall and get up, we fall and get up, we fall and get up.”

Advancing in the spiritual life does not make us smugly holier than thou, it makes us more painfully aware of our falls and more deeply grateful for the mercy and grace of being able to get back up again.

Sometimes we are overwhelmed and unable to bear looking at hard truths. Sometimes we need time and space to heal and be renewed. But after we have rested and recovered our strength,

we are called to look honestly at ourselves and our world and name the flaws we see as a first step toward reformation and reconciliation.

Amos and Micah did that, and chief among the wrongs they saw were deeply entrenched traditional forms of worship and spiritual practice. They shocked their religion and nation by saying that traditional forms do not matter, in fact they can get in the way of the essence of what God and the world need us to do. Amos says that God hates their offerings and worship services and even the hymns they love to sing.

This was shocking because to most people, then and now, the essence of religion consists of going to our place of worship and doing the traditional rituals and singing the traditional songs. We feel that we are right with God and the world and ourselves when we do those things. We love the comfortable familiarity, and we want it to continue. We want to hand it down to future generations so they can have the same good feelings that we have.

But Amos and Micah say no, these traditional forms are not what is important, and can make us lose sight of what is. They can make us settle for a surface piety that leaves the world as it is when what God and the world desperately need is the deep reformation and reconciliation that comes when we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God—justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Today, is it a matter of life and death that we live as everyday saints striving to reform and reconcile our world. It is also a matter of life and death that we reform and reconcile the church, because many mainstream middle of the road and progressive churches are dwindling to the point of being unable to survive. Every pastor I talk to these days laments the loss of young families and children in their churches, and looks at aging leadership and decreasing attendance and wonders how much longer their churches can keep going.

And yet the need for what a church can offer and do is only increasing as the world becomes more divided and violent and dysfunctional, and as mental illness and social instability rise in response.

Last week during Joys and Concerns one of us stood up and said “I don’t follow or understand everything in our worship services and I’m agnostic about other things, but what I appreciate is that this church calls on each of us to be a better person and calls upon the

community to be a better community, and it's the only institution that fulfills this purpose in Strafford, and if it didn't exist there would be an enormous hole."

This church needs to keep serving that purpose of calling us each to be better people and calling the community to be a better community and the world to be a better world, but in order to do that, we need to find new ways of being a church, ways that work for the people who are no longer willing to be part of the church as it is. We need to preserve the essentials of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly on the sacred way, but we need to question our rituals and offerings and songs and ways of talking about the spiritual life and even what we call ourselves.

We need to seek the Spirit's lead and trust that it will drive us as it drove Jesus into a wilderness of transformation so that he was able to emerge full of the Spirit's wisdom and power and deliver it in a way that worked for his time and place.

We are just ordinary, everyday saints, and some of us are tired, some are suffering from physical or mental illness, we all are carrying the weight of an increasingly worrisome world, and we are few in number.

But we are not alone. A cloud of witnesses surrounds us—all the saints before us and in this world today are with us, we are part of the same movement, and every act of love we do, no matter how small, joins with that whole vast ocean of love. The same Spirit that evolved the human heart and mind, the greatest power in the universe, is within us each wanting to help us do the work of creating the realm of God's love on earth.

So let us rise up and do whatever we each can do to heal and renew ourselves, and to reform and reconcile our church and world.

Let us pray in silence, opening to the Spirit so that it can flow through all the gifts and life we have...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Three deer in the orchard.
They let me pass
as if I were one of them.