

Today is Reformation Sunday; celebrated by the few of us Reformed Christians who celebrate the heritage of our forbearers, the faith they professed and passed along to us. Many of you know that I just completed teaching a course on John Calvin in our Adult Seminar Series ... so I'm primed. In my return to history I've rediscovered an important story about one of our Presbyterian founding fathers: a man of courage and principle who stood up for what he believed, against the authority of the state ... and won.

His name was Francis Makemie, and he was the first Presbyterian minister in North America. Makemie came to the American colonies from Northern Ireland in 1683. With tremendous energy he traveled long distances on horseback to start Presbyterian churches all throughout Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In time, Makemie became one of the leading Presbyterian ministers in the colonies. When Scottish settlers on Long Island invited him to come be a guest preacher for them, he went.

Long Island is where Makemie got in trouble with the law. The royal Governor of New York – Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury – was a staunch Anglican. As far as he was concerned, because New York was an English colony, it had but one recognized church: the Church of England. Makemie had been warned about Cornbury. He'd been advised not to lead worship services on Long Island, but he went ahead and preached anyway. Lord Cornbury had him arrested, along with an associate, John Hampton. The charge was “preaching without a license.” The arrest warrant from the Governor charged the two men with spreading “their Pernicious Doctrine and Principles” in Long Island without “having obtained License for so doing, which is directly contrary to the known laws of England.”

Makemie was hauled before the Governor in January, 1707. In his defense, he cited Parliament's Act of Toleration of 1688, by which King William and Queen Mary had established religious freedom.

Cornbury was not impressed. He insisted that particular law applied to England only, not to England's colonies in the New World. He threatened to throw Makemie into jail if he didn't post bond for “good behavior” including, specifically, promising not to preach in New York without a license.

Makemie refused, invoking the name of the Queen; who, he went on to say, had not limited his religious freedom so severely as the Governor had. By implication, he was asking the Governor if he thought himself wiser than the Queen. The Governor had no choice but to sign an order for his release.

On his way out, Makemie asked the court clerk to show him the specific law that limited the Act of Toleration to England alone. The clerk held up a law book, but when Makemie offered to pay him to write out a copy of that paragraph, the clerk refused. There *was* no such paragraph, and Makemie knew it. The Governor called out to the Presbyterian minister, as he was leaving, “You, sir, know Law.” It was a grudging gesture of respect. Makemie and Hampton had been acquitted, establishing an important legal precedent for religious freedom in the colonies. Francis Makemie was in good company: he wasn't the first man to be accused of ‘preaching without a license.’

The twenty-first chapter of Matthew tells how Jesus himself got into similar trouble. This scene is a word battle between Jesus and the temple leaders. Verse by verse, they battle until Jesus interrupts by telling this story: A father had two sons. The father asked both to work for him. The first said, “No,” but later went anyway. The second said, “Yes,” but never showed up. Jesus asks the temple leaders, “Which do you think did the will of the Father?” They give the only answer possible.

Jesus then tells these religious leaders, "Don't you get it? You know God's way. You know the right words about God. You teach the right words. Yet you play word games and you won't consider that you, too, need to change."

If there had been an inquest into Jesus' death following his crucifixion, the parable of the two brothers would likely have been presented as one of the things that got him killed. Jesus' inference of the deep hypocrisy that existed; the gulf between the words and the deeds of the temple leaders, hit home hard, and they never forgot it.

For Jesus, faith is more than knowing the right words to say. Being faithful is more than entertaining intellectual exercise. Say what you will, but do the right thing, the faithful deed, the honest and caring thing. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Those are Jesus words. (Matthew 7:12) Jesus' actions spoke for themselves.

Jesus wants followers, not admirers. His question to us is more than, "Do you agree?" -- He also asks, "Will you join me?" Jesus asks us to let the truth out; to open up the prisons we put our greatest dreams and deepest desires in, for ourselves and for our church.

For most of us, it doesn't take the Royal Governor of New York to limit our speech or restrict our actions for the sake of God; we can do that pretty well our selves. We can generally talk ourselves out of doing most any good deed, we can find a reason to excuse ourselves, or conveniently forget that thing we at one point thought would be very good to be doing. We can sell ourselves and our Lord, very short, very easily, contradicting the heritage of our forbearers and the intentions God has for us as God's children.

When we celebrate Reformation Day, we do more than just look back at what the Reformers said and did. We gain renewed inspiration through their examples.

These were men who by and large didn't originally intend to start a revolution, to overthrow the power of the Church as they knew it; but instead sought dialogue, process & gradual change. Honestly. That's all they looked to do when they started. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Church Door in Wittenburg, on October 31, 1517, he truly believed that he was paving the way to an open debate on the issues. When John Calvin wrote his first draft of the Institutes of the Christian Religion in 1536- he sent them to the French King, Charles V, so that his views could be openly shared and debated. Neither anticipated the turmoil that lay ahead, yet when opposition came, they did not shirk from the convictions that had brought them thus far.

When he was asked to recant his convictions, Martin Luther said, "Here I stand, I can do no other." He stood firm and the world has never been the same.

On the one hand, words are very fleeting, fragile things: uttered one moment, the next moment simply gone. So often, words seem like little more than exhaled breath. Yet, on the other, when spoken with deep conviction, from the heart, what we hear ourselves say can begin to make a difference for us as they begin to compel us toward faithful action, even despite ourselves.

In a day and time when it appears that the only right thing to do is to ***be free from*** convictions, ***not truly free to hold convictions***, an old adage comes to mind: that if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

Recently, a candidate for a student government office at a major university was harassed & demonized by the campus newspaper for his potentially dangerous beliefs. He was a Christian. Now I don't know the fine details of this account, but at least this young person had the courage to stand for her beliefs, and people knew it.

How does that saying go? If you were convicted of being a Christian, what would be cited as evidence?

How does what we say ever match what we do? How do we connect the dots between our words and our actions?

Here's a final illustration of how it is we might accomplish this.

If you were here Wednesday night, for our Harvest Dinner speaker, Howard Friend, you heard it then, but I think it still bears repeating. If not, here it goes for the first time.

He was on a trip to Thailand, back some years ago. He was with a group of people, a tour group, and they were brought to see an animal trainer with an elephant. They were challenged to a tug of war- to see how many people it would take to outpull this pachyderm. A harness was put on it, and a big, thick rope, and fifty people pulled, and pulled. And pulled. Then the elephant decided to move, backwards, and it did, completely unfazed by the humans pulling on this little rope. It was clear that if this animal ever wanted to move a tree, or a house, it could, at will.

Then, after this display of immense strength, the trainer showed the group how it was they he'd restrain the elephant. He took a thin little green cord of rope, tied it to the animal's back right leg, tied it to a post, & hammered it into the ground. That's all it would take, said the trainer.

No way, Howard & the others said, in disbelief—how could that possibly be? That animal could snap that rope like a thread if it wanted to.

The trainer explained that when the elephant was growing up, when it was just learning how to walk, it's right rear leg was tied up to the post, and it was unable to move. It learned early on, that it couldn't move when its leg was tied, even though it had long ago outgrown that limitation.

What is that green cord for you? What is it that's holding you back- not from what you believe- but from that which God is asking you to do? From what is that green cord holding you back?

Reach down & cut it. Release yourself. Let go. Let God take you to the next step, in faith. For God has given us all work to do.

As M. Scott Peck once said about the work set before each one of us, as individuals and as a community: 'When we avoid the legitimate struggles that results from actually confronting problems, we also avoid the growth that problems demand from us.'

So for those of you who are already stretched to your limits, are doing your utmost to do the work God has set before you, conscientiously and consistently, I 'thank God for you', for your faithfulness, diligence & persistence. For those of you who feel that there is more stretching to be done and there is somewhere in you a willingness to break loose from what ties you down, I say 'thank God for you, too.' For the courage God is giving you to be willing to be stretched a bit more and to open up to new opportunities as they are set before you in your life.

Whoever we are we are called by God. Today we recognize the heritage of those who led us to this place, the Francis Makemies, the Luthers & Calvins, even the normal, everyday Rosa Parks', who walked a faithful journey of life. We are gathered to honor the heritage they passed along to us, and to pray that through God's Holy Spirit, we might embody all that God intends for us to be- for ourselves, for God's church and God's world, now and forever. Amen.