

“Reformed and Reforming”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 29, 2023 - Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 25
[Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46](#)

“Are we there yet?!” If you have the privilege of being a parent, you’ve probably heard this refrain more than once coming from the back seat of the car on a long road trip, or even when going just down the block. While I myself do not have children, having served for many years as a youth minister who drove groups of middle schoolers around for trips of varying lengths, I have heard this annoying chorus being sung many more times than any human being should ever have to.

But I don’t think that I or any of the rest of us have heard “are we there yet?!” coming from the back seat quite as much as Moses must have from the children of Israel as he led them through the wilderness. Beginning his journey as leader of the Israelites as an 80-year-old golden ager, he led them for 40 years through an inhospitable desert wilderness, and, as we’ve heard from our scripture lessons of the last several weeks, all along the way, the people complained about their situation, wishing and hoping that they would be able to stop wandering around by finally arriving at their destination, the land of promise.

Perhaps Moses, at one or more of his mountaintop meetings with God, passed on the complaints and questions, asking, “Are we there yet, God? Will we ever get there? When can I be relieved of the duty of carting these complainers around? Can I ever retire?” And then, at the ripe old age of 120, when Moses was meeting with God on top of Mount Nebo, just northeast of the Dead Sea, God answered, “You’re not there yet, Moses, but you’re almost there.” And then, showing him the land across the valley of the River Jordan, God said to Moses, “There is the destination of the children of Israel. You’ve done your job well. Your work is done.” Moses died there, in the land east of the Jordan, and God, who knew Moses face to face, buried him in a valley of that land and passed on the duty of leading the Israelites (and listening to their complaints) to Joshua son of Nun.

Here, on this Reformation Sunday, we remember and celebrate the work of some of the spiritual descendants of Moses and Joshua, the Reformers of the 16th century CE, who both led people and complained about their location. We

remember the Reformers on this Sunday as it is the closest to October 31, which was the date on which, 508 years ago, German priest and scholar Martin Luther sent to the archbishop of the region his “95 Theses,” complaining mostly about the abuses and corruption of his fellow Catholic clergy. He may have also tacked a copy of his complaints onto the door of the All Saints’ Church at the university in Wittenberg, Germany, as was the custom there, for consideration and scholarly debate, which happened all across Europe as the Theses were also printed and distributed near and wide.

While Luther’s intent in offering his public complaints was to reform the church, the result of his actions led the church to excommunicate him four years after the Theses were first posted. Although he was officially kicked out of the church, Luther was also protected by powerful friends, and he continued teaching, preaching, writing (including our first hymn), and leading a new movement now known as the Protestant Reformation.

Those of us who are gathered here, as Congregationalists of the United Church of Christ, are part of that movement. We follow the tradition of Luther and other Reformers, like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, in identifying parts of ourselves and our way of being as a church that are inconsistent with our highest calling, as we heard in our gospel lesson, to love God and love our neighbors. We look at ourselves so that we can identify what is not right, not just to complain about it, but so that we can work at changing, becoming more faithful in living out our calling and moving towards where we are called to be.

Are we there yet, loving God and our neighbors as we are called to do? Hardly, but we’re working at it! We are still reforming as individuals and a community of faith.

And if we look more broadly at our world and ask how we’re doing at the work of growing God’s realm of love and peace on earth? We would say we are not hardly there yet either. There is much work to be done.

If we were to stand atop Mount Nebo today, and gaze eastward as Moses did so long ago, we would see smoke rising into the sky above the land of promise, where all too often flows not milk and honey, but the tears of mourning and shed blood. We must ask how we can use whatever influence we have to reform the

world so that differing neighbors can live side by side and respect one another's differences and right to exist with dignity and in peace.

Much closer to home, if we were to listen to the cries of those mourning in Maine today, we would be reminded that we too are a violent people and are in need of reformed hearts and ways of living. We must ask what can we do to fight against our love of violence and our increasingly common usage of our freedoms to cause terrible harm and destruction upon others.

The work of reforming our world and its communities, near and far, is great. But we are called by God to do this work, and we are empowered by God to do this work, beginning with each of us reforming our own hearts and ways of living. Each of us can become more faithful to God and be more loving of others in our homes and neighborhoods. We can all treat people with more dignity and respect. We can all support efforts to create a more just and peaceful world, and we can all call upon our leaders to work toward this as well.

Today, on this Reformation Sunday, let us take up our calling as a reforming people to continue God's work of reforming the world. May the world be blessed with peace through us, and may more of God's peace dwell within us. Amen.