

SERMON
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Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2010
St John's Chapel, UCC

Numbers 14: 1-10

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, "The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them." But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

Matthew 14: 25-33

And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Very soon after I came to St. John's chapel in May this year I learnt that one of the special events in the yearly calendar of this church is the sausage supper. I always wondered where that tradition came from. So far I heard that it was already a tradition in the North Church at the end of the 50es. Maybe some of you can help me with that after the service. What I found so peculiar about it is not the fact of eating sausages – cause, there is always a good reason to eat sausages- but the timing, it seemed rather close to the lent season.

It made me think of Ulrich (Huldrych) Zwingli. He was the Reformer of the church in Zürich, Switzerland. Zwingli is an important figure of the Swiss Reformation but since he was killed early in a battle against a catholic army, he and his reformation are less well known than the later more prominent one of Calvin in Geneva. Independent from Luther, but at roughly the same time Zwingli developed a Reformation theology through the intense study of scripture. He criticized similar practices of the church, but had a little stronger concern for the care of the poor than Luther showed. He was the pastor at one of Zurich's biggest churches and was able to convince the council of the city to reform the church, against the protest of the catholic bishop. Luther and Zwingli differed as well, most prominent in the understanding of communion. The attempt to overcome the differences and form an alliance failed because of it. When Luther and Zwingli met face to face in 1529 they heatedly disagreed. The division of the protestant churches over this matter lasted well until the last century. Other aspects of life were changed in Zurich as well, evangelical preaching, order of service and the end of celibacy were decreed, new schools founded, property of the monasteries was used to build and finance hospitals and welfare – all in cooperation with the city council. Quickly this type of Reformation spread to the neighboring areas; after his death the Zürich Reformation would merge with Calvin's Geneva to form a unified Swiss Reformed coalition.

But back to the sausages:

I thought about Zwingli when I learnt about sausage supper here at St. John's because sausages triggered the Reformation in Zurich. Before I heard that at seminary I did not know that a sausage could be provocative, but at that time 1522 it was just so.

It was the early evening on the first day of lent that 12 men met in the workshop of the bookbinder Froschauer with the sole intent to demonstratively cut up and share 2 smoked sausages – a frivolous act of breaking the time of lent, in which the church by punishment had forbidden to consume meat. Zwingli was one of them but did not share in the eating. For our eyes the scene is not without comedy: twelve men solemnly chewing their small piece of sausage. But

for them it is a step towards what Luther called evangelical freedom. They have learned in the study of scripture that the church of that time was wrong in deciding for them to follow a particular eating calendar - probably the smallest of the grievances they discovered. The act of breaking the fast was repeated several times and the complaints from the church became so urgent, that the council decreed a dispute should be held between Zwingli and representatives of the church. You can see now the gravity of it: eating that sausage became for Zürich, what Luther's 95 thesis are for Wittenberg.

They started something new, unknown, but dangerously controversial, with an unsure outcome. Quite like Israel's journey through the desert. There is a promise, but the way is uncertain, many dangers lie ahead. To use the imagery of today's lesson from the Hebrew text of the Bible: Zwingli and Luther have with that act become messengers of what lies ahead, the good land that Joshua and Caleb found – the evangelical freedom. I am sure that Zwingli was aware of the dangers this act of protest could have. It is this courage and conviction that fascinates us still today. They are spies of the good land ahead, the land of milk and honey and now turn to their people, to widen the imagery, their church and fellow citizens and witness and justify why they did that. And the people, will they listen – or will they threaten to stone them?

Zwingli gave an exhaustive explanation based on scripture and the council supported him overwhelmingly; after more disputes the authority for further changes in Zurich would be fully with Zwingli. Here it seems the people followed into the good land, or at least a good part of them. The ones sticking to the old order would leave Zürich or form alliances to get rid of that unwanted messenger and his reform.

Reformation Day give us a wonderful opportunity to remember the ancestors who first packed their bags and came to the United States. I read in Pastor Becky's sermon on previous Reformation Days about the very divergent traditions and people that came here and shaped this community and this church. I have learnt about the Dingeldeins from Prussia, the Zays from Romania, the Datemas from Holland and now found out that were also ancestors from Switzerland, even from the neighboring region of Zürich, the county, in Swiss German Kanton, Bern, that was influenced by Zwingli's Reformation. It is the story of Ulrich Bieri, grandfather of Ida Barry and Esther Steinhauer, that I would like to share with you.

Ulrich Bieri was in a very literal sense a messenger of the good land to his family. He went to America in 1887, after having lost a favorite brother, and if I read the family tree right, he seemed

to have been very young at that time, about 15 or sixteen, when he came to the US with a friend. What he saw, impressed him, land wide and open, space enough to run a farm - very unlike Switzerland where farmland was rare for their family.

So he went back to and convinced his family to trust in the chances of this new country. The whole family went, but the family chronicles tell of an ordeal of a journey: in New York they ran into a severe blizzard, that killed many people, dead horses lined the streets and finally arriving in Missouri they could not get to their new home; mud made travel impossible.

But they pushed on forward and finally settled in California, Mo. There they made that dream of their own farmland true, sharing in and relying on the mutual help of other Swiss families of the same region Bern, who had settled in California; among them the Rohrbachs who were professional cheese makers and the Haldimans. The children of Ulrich Bieri would marry into these families, Esther Steinhauer's father Frank married Marie Haldiman, while Ida Barry's mother Ruth married Emmet Rohrbach.

This Swiss community was living their Reformed heritage. Swiss German long remained the language used in the conference talks over the "party line" connecting the different farms.

They went to the Evangelical Synod church, that came from the united evangelical tradition of Prussia, but would keep to the stricter Reformed principles: no alcohol, no smoking, no card games especially not on the Sunday. The strict observance of the Sunday would lead to the speculation that these farmers by desire would probably watch a crop being ruined in a storm on Sunday, and not lift a finger to save it.

Now coming to the German Church in Springfield Ulrich Bieri's granddaughters soon discovered that things were different: one drank wine for communion and some members like "Father Bill" would even suggest to pull in the beer wagon for the Sunday school picnic! It must have been quite a little shock.

You see how well the different roles of our scripture lesson fit to the protagonists of our Reformation heritage. Grandfather Bieri is a Joshua, and his family thankfully did much better than Israel in the desert and followed the call to the good new land.

Luther or Zwingli in the role of Caleb and Joshua; they tell the church that has been on the move from slavery of old church traditions to the new freedom of the evangelical teaching. The freedom we have in the knowledge that our salvation lies not in our deeds and qualities but in God's grace

and our faith in God. The ones sticking with their catholic beliefs would be cast in the role of Israel, wanting to go back to Egypt with threats of murder on the lips.

It feels good to put Luther and Zwingli in the roles of the good guys, the ones who did it right; their lives and their teachings after all formed our church and inspire and encourage us to this day.

Yet it would be a bit too simple to leave it at that; since we know also of aspects of their lives where the roles might be just opposite. We know very well, that Zwingli and the Reformed tradition later would easily see Luther and his tradition in the role of the complaining people, sticking to the old catholic ways, while they themselves would take on the hero role of having gone further into the new good land, finishing up with the rest of unevangelical influences on the church.

And then again, for some of the more radical reformers Zwingli and Luther were not the good messengers, but still entangled in the old ways, not evangelical enough. In that setting they could be given the role of the unfaithful people saying enough is enough, let's go back to Egypt. In Zwingli's case these people were former friends that turned away from him and became the early figures of the Baptist movement. The demand of the radical reformers of more liberty in matters of religion from the governing authorities was the point where Zwingli would not follow. Zwingli and even more the city council could even literally fit in the role of the complaining people, since the radical reformers were threatened with persecution or death, some even were killed.

So you see it can turn out quite difficult to properly assign the roles our text offers. Our reformation ancestors fit in both roles, depending on who is assigning the role or what aspect of their lives you look at. And here we already have the advantage of hindsight, we can see clearer; in the time itself it would have been even harder to know who to listen to...

And I wonder, does it differ much from our own experiences?

Looking at myself, I know I fit both roles. I can surely identify with the frightened, complaining people in the desert saying: no more, this is just not possible. Hearing about the 19th century settlers, like Ulrich Bieri, I am clearly the one saying: oh not I, that is too hard. My faith is not strong enough for that. But then, I came here to Springfield from Europe, too. It was with an airplane and not quite pioneer style, but the unknown, the doubts of what we would find, are quite comparable though. It turned out to be a good land to us so far, but looking back to last year that was far from certain; it was a decision made based on faith. We were making decisions half in the dark. Now in hindsight it feels like a good decision, but in the time of return we will again be left

guessing and trusting to take a good step. I am sure you can fill in examples of your life when decisions put you in one or the other role, or maybe you are sitting here now pondering and weighing an upcoming step...

Where is God in this story of difficult choices?

You might recall how the story in Numbers continues. God is outraged over Israel's lack of trust, so much so, that Moses has to intervene and in a clever argument convinced God not to let go of his people. Still, this generation will not see Promised Land but die in the desert, the children though will come, as will Joshua and Caleb. It is a harsh verdict. And if I were a fire and brimstone preacher I would have already lifted my finger, saying something like: "You better believe or else..." I am not such a preacher and I do not think that the text is fully understood, when you only read the warning in it.

Of course, we do not want to be the ones wandering in the desert; thinking about the roles I naturally felt better describing the hero of the story. But I know that I was not always the hero, and if then more by accident. The look at our Reformation ancestors suggests that even if you are a hero of faith, there might be some tasks that were left undone, or need correcting. We can even utterly fail, like Israel does or as Peter does in our gospel lesson. So sure, so full of faith does he step out of the boat ... and then he sinks. The strong wind shakes his little faith, making him afraid of his own courage. I am thankful that our bible does not only tell of the good days, but that the witnesses God chose for us are humans like us: capable of greatness and of failure. The stories of these witnesses touch us with their honesty. It is in their failure, that God is with them. God does not end the relationship with Israel, not here, not later, in other situations when God is disappointed by his people. Even in failure God opens a future, and does not let go of us. Jesus does not let Peter drown, but pulls him back out. And I would guess: not in his power to walk on water but in his mercy the apostles recognized that Jesus was the son of god.

It is by faith and grace alone, not by our merits and good deeds, that we are justified before God – this Reformation principle, *sola gratia*, is at the heart of the scripture lessons. Israel enters the land by grace, the Reformation ancestors live in their triumphs and their shortcomings by grace, the churches of today faced with new decisions live by grace and we too are carried by it.

God does not let go of us, does not let go of his church. The rifts that opened between Luther, Zwingli, the radical reformers and even the catholic church are healed or healing – it takes

sometimes generations in the desert, but as we see in the forming of the UCC, these old differences and the reason for it finally turn out to be not as important anymore.

Sharing the memories of this congregation it is fascinating to see how God called all these different people with different traditions together; a thing that probably would not have happened in this form in their ancestral home. The learning from each other's differences in respect is the great richness of this church: Granddaughters of a principled Swiss teetotaler next to descendants of a Prussian brewer, I like that image.

It makes me curious what else is possible for God in the long run...

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.