

## That Ever-Changing Constant

[Text - Matthew 5:38-48]

Pastor Dave Shackle  
October 16, 2016

In two weeks, many churches throughout the world will kick-off a year-long celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I mention this today, in part, to remind us of just how youthful and vigorous we are, at a mere 200! I also bring this up, because one of the key issues at the heart of that Reformation is extremely relevant to our congregation's past, present, and future. It's an issue which needs to be continually addressed by us, and by the entire Christian Church. Who can forget that catchy phrase Saint Augustine used, some sixteen-hundred years ago? *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* -The Church is *always* reforming! Martin Luther literally *nailed* that idea, with his 95 Theses. And Pope Francis even used it as the central theme in his message to the Roman Curia this past Christmas: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* -The Church is *always* reforming!

Now I will admit, that there have been *occasions* [O.K. *centuries*] when the Institutional Church has had some difficulty with the issue of reform. After Luther posted his 95 Theses for Church reform on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, Pope Leo X *did* denounce him as an demonic heretic, excommunicate him, and call for him and all his writings to be burned at the stake. Of course Luther's response - that the Church of Rome had become "the most licentious den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, and the kingdom of sin, death, and hell" certainly didn't help smooth the waters. The fact is, trying to reform any longstanding institution is going to be difficult. And when that institution claims to represent an unchanging, Divine Truth, the degree of difficulty tends to increase exponentially.

Yet here's the important factor to consider: even though the reality of Divine Love remains an absolute constant, the way in which people experience and express that love, can change and evolve from generation to generation. Therefore, any denomination, congregation, or person of faith that is not open to change or reform, runs the risk of becoming a caricature of religious inflexibility and intolerance - rather than a reflection of the Compassionate Christ. Jesus himself shows us the importance of challenging and changing religious teachings and practices, when they fail to express God's inclusive and expansive love and grace. "It was said of old, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek as well. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Heavenly Parent."

Back in Moses' day, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was actually a *restrained* response. If someone hit you in the eye or knocked-out your tooth, the usual reaction was to round-up your buddies, go blacken *both* eyes and knock-out half of that person's teeth. So, "an eye for an eye" was an expression of the Divine call for an *equitable* response. However, as Jesus reveals, the Divine desire far surpasses a reaction of equal retribution; it calls for a gracious compassion which freely forgives, and allows both parties to move forward - thereby breaking that vicious cycle of violence. Jesus understands that the Holy Source of Life is a resilient and responsive entity - One who continues to explore and refine creative new ways to connect and communicate with the Human Family. One whose loving Presence continues to be revealed in and through the love which is shared and expressed throughout the entire Creation.

Who can forget that catchy phrase the United Church of Christ adopted as a Slogan 12 years ago: *Never Place a Period Where God has Place a Comma - God is Still Speaking!* This phrase is a marvelous reminder that the Holy One is still seeking to redeem and renew our broken Humanity - to bring a Divine Spirit of reconciliation to our fractured lives, communities and world. Today, as you and I celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this fantastic Family of Faith, we give thanks for the courageous people who paved the way for us, through their dedicated lives, their devout worship, and their open and flexible spirits. We also recognize that it is now *our* turn, our time, to faithfully renew and reform the Church, so that the love of Christ might be freely proclaimed and shared with *all* people- wherever they might be in their Life's journey.

You and I, as the present-day members and friends of Brecksville United Church of Christ, still have a crucial role in seeing to it that divisiveness, exclusion and prejudice be replaced by Christ's extravagant welcome and grace. We have tremendously *Good News* to share! And with Divine guidance and inspiration, this 200-year-old congregation can remain youthful and vigorous and *faithful* for many generations to come!