

*Longing to Thrive*  
24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Reformation Sunday  
October 30, 2016  
Jill R. Russell

Introduction the Scriptures: On this Reformation Sunday, I invite you to listen for one of the themes of the Reformation as you hear God's word today. It is a list of Latin phrases. Sola fide – by faith alone. Sola Scriptura – by scripture alone. Sola gratia – by grace alone.

Texts:       Habakkuk 1.1-4; 2.1-4;  
                  Psalm 119. 137-144;  
                  2 Thessalonians 1.1-4, 11-12;  
                  Luke 19.1-10

Failure to thrive. Have you heard that medical term? It's most often used in pediatrics to describe a child who is unable to put on or maintain a healthy weight. It can be linked to a variety of other health concerns that can create problems for that child over time. The phrase came to mind recently as I was trying to get my mind around the zeitgeist (the spirit or mood) of this moment in our nation's history.

I was thinking about the revolutionary talk in the early primaries from both sides of the political spectrum making the accusation that the political establishment on both sides of the aisle are not recognizing that large segments of our nation are being left behind. I was thinking about the message of the Black Lives Matter movement, or listen to the voices of the First Nations (the Native Americans) in our country. A deep longing to thrive is at the heart of every one of these movements of discontent. Giving voice to that longing is the heartbeat of the prophet, the reformer, the revolutionary. As I was thinking about that medical term "failure to thrive" it helped me to understand the intensity of the rhetoric in each of these movements. My suspicion is that you could trace a pretty direct relationship between the intensity of the need and the intensity of the rhetoric.

Read the traditional stories of our origins in Genesis; the world was ordered to create and sustain human flourishing. When we live in sync with the natural world and with each other and with our God the inevitable trajectory is to thrive. If there is failure to thrive anywhere in the realm of human life or ecological life something is out of sync and needs correction. There is clearly something out of sync. Figuring out *what* is out of sync and *how* we can correct is complicated work that requires the very best of our human intellect, political will, and spiritual conviction.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago the book by Brian McLaren we were reading in our fall series *We Make the Road by Walking*. His book, in the introduction, begins this way: "What we all want is pretty simple really. We want to be alive. To feel alive. Not just to exist but to thrive, to live out loud, walk tall, breathe free. We want to be less lonely, less exhausted, less conflicted or afraid...more awake, more grateful, more energize and purposeful. We capture this kind of mindful, over-brimming life in terms like well-being, shalom, blessedness, wholeness, harmony, life to the full, and aliveness."<sup>1</sup> There is a lengthy footnote at the end of that sentence referring to that last list of words. In it McLaren makes the case that the phrase in Greek that gets translated as *eternal life* which many Christians think of as life after death more literally means *life of the ages*. The phrase is meant to be a contrast to life in this present age – life in this economy - life in this zeitgeist (if you will). Luke uses *eternal life* in as a synonym for the kingdom of God. In the gospel of John the *kingdom of God* language becomes simply "life, eternal life, life to the full."<sup>2</sup>

The point of drilling down on this language is to lift up that the heart of the Christian faith is to speak into this human longing to thrive. This is what we are to be about. To give ourselves personally and institutionally to the question of what it means to be fully alive; what it looks like to follow the movement of God's Spirit to support and sustain the longing to thrive.

The prophet Habakkuk sees that his world is out of sync when he looks around at the increasing violence as Babylon descends on Judah. He

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-long Quest For Spiritual Formation, Reorientation and Activation* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2014), xv

<sup>2</sup> Ibid...footnote with this content is found on pg xv.

sounds the alarm. The fear and crushing anxiety that comes from witnessing trauma that you are helpless to stop has taken its toll and he cries out to God in complaint: “Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law(the Torah) becomes slack (ineffective)<sup>3</sup> and justice never prevails.”

With this prayer of protest, Habakkuk joins a long line including psalmists and prophets and Jesus himself praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. So many of these prayers are met in the moment with silence. Remarkably, Habakkuk receives a response to this complaint in an oracle or word from God that the vision God has for us in the Torah – those ancient stories of creation, the formation of God’s people, and the ways of life entrusted to them – that vision and the God who gave it is to be trusted. “The righteous live by faith.”

Sola fide. By faith alone.

Faith is easy when life is good. It’s easy to affirm that God is good and God’s vision for the world is right when life in our corner is going well. It’s whole other thing when we find ourselves struggling; when life isn’t fair and things are not right in our corner of the world. When other people refuse to live according to God’s vision the blow-back on us can be excruciating. I can resonate with the Psalmist who confesses today that “indignation has consumed me, because my enemies forget your words!”<sup>4</sup> You can feel the anger and the desire for vengeance that can bubble up in moments like those. In those moments, the vision God has for the world can suddenly seems naïve and foolish and the ways of the world appear far more sophisticated and enticing.

The Psalmist today points us in a different direction, though. At a time when he felt small and troubled and distressed he leaned not toward the

---

<sup>3</sup> These additional comments in parentheses to help fill out what Habakkuk meant when he referred to the law being slack comes from commentary on the text by Pamela Cooper-White *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 119.139.

ways of the world but right back into the vision of God. "I do not forget your commandments – your teaching is true!"<sup>5</sup> The Psalmist insists upon this not because it was giving him some competitive edge in the moment. No! He felt small and of little account. Rather than trying to build himself up by tearing this other person down in some revenge fantasy, what built him back up was reconnecting with the truth of God's word. "Your commandments are my delight."<sup>6</sup>

I know that probably sounds incredibly pious. But stay with me for a moment. I was thinking this week about one of the core pieces of insight from the work of Non-Violent Communication. There is a strategy to use when you feel under attack or feel judgement swirling around you whether the judgement is coming at you from others or worse coming from inside of yourself. The strategy is to drop below the level of the swirling judgment and anger to connect with the deeper needs and values that flow out of the core of who we are as human beings. When you can listen for those values and connect with people around those needs we all share, it's far more life giving than the revenge fantasy that may at first pop into our minds.

I realized this week, that the Psalmist can say that *Your commands, O God, are my delight* not because he is some overly pious goody two shoes but because he has come to recognize that God's vision for the world - God's way of life revealed to us in the scriptures - answers the deepest needs of the human soul.

Sola scriptura. By scripture alone.

The last piece of wisdom I want to point to in our texts today comes from the gospel of Luke. Zacchaeus is a perfect picture of someone who has adopted the ways of the world in his quest to thrive. He has bought the line that wealth brings power and power brings security and that you should play the system and watch out for yourself because no else will. He has made his wealth off the backs of the poor. He is hated in his community and for good reason.

---

<sup>5</sup> From Psalm 119.141, 142

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 119.143.

We don't know why he wanted so badly to see Jesus. But he scampers up this tree to watch from a distance. Jesus walks straight up to him invites himself into the man's home: "I must stay at your house today."<sup>7</sup> This is a signal to everyone that Jesus accepts this scoundrel of a man and in fact embraces him. There is nothing this man has done to justify this warm embrace. Jesus offers hospitality and acceptance and regard as free and pure gift. "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."<sup>8</sup>

Sola Gratia. By grace alone.

What Zaccheaus does with that grace is to fully embrace God's vision. He immediately sees the ways of the world for what they are: deadly for all involved. So, he repays those he cheated fourfold because that is what the law given to Moses requires according to the scriptures. In doing so, Zacchaeus recognizes that God's vision of making restitution when we have done wrong is not punishment but the pathway to freedom. Grace received became a faith practiced; a life reformed and hopefully always reforming according to the word of God.

So on this Reformation Sunday, let us living into our calling:  
to follow the Spirit of God to be fully alive.

"For there is still a vision....if it seems to tarry, wait for it...the righteous live (and I would add *thrive*) by their faith."<sup>9</sup>

Thanks be to God!

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 19.5

<sup>8</sup> Luke 19.10

<sup>9</sup> From Habakkuk 2.3-4 excerpted