

WGUMC October 8, 2017 "Christ Against Culture: The
Radical Reformation" John 17:1a, 11-19

You might have glanced at the sermon title and wondered, "What is the Radical Reformation?" For a colleague of mine at an unnamed church in the state of Idaho, the radical reformation started when she wanted the church to make the women's restroom accessible. To do that, they were going to have to reduce the number of stalls from four to two. That prompted such a furor that my friend had to take out a restraining order on a member of the Board of Trustees.

If you've been involved with a church for very long, you know all about radical renovations. But what was the radical Reformation? That's not an easy question. The most famous reformers, Luther and Calvin, had set off a firestorm of dissent from a Catholic Church that they viewed as abusing power and corrupting faith. That's a dangerous charge to make, because someone will eventually come along and make the same charge against you.

It should be no surprise at all that it was only a matter of time before Luther and Calvin and their followers abused their power, too. Or they simply let secular rulers do it for them. Lutherans and Calvinists both made deals with the powers that be to protect them from the pope's allies and armies. In doing so, they were coopted by a group of wealthy elites who too often used the Reformation to advance their own interests.

Within a few decades, the backlash started to build and that backlash is called the Radical Reformation. The Radical Reformers wanted to be totally free from the authority of the institutional church and the state. As they saw it, the true Church was not an institution that protected its power. Rather, the Church was a group of people who wanted to protect the purity of their beliefs.

Of course, the Radical Reformers didn't all agree on what those beliefs should be, and they splintered into many different groups. But they all said they wanted the same thing: a radical

return to what they considered to be original Christianity. They went back to the Bible, even more strictly and literally than Luther and Calvin did. For example, they could find no stories about babies being baptized in the Bible, so they did away with infant baptism. Only people who confessed Christ for themselves and could convince others that they understood what that confession meant were to be baptized and admitted into membership in the Church.

Now you have to protect the Church from outside influences if you want to maintain its purity, so the Radical Reformers created their own self-sufficient communities. You might be familiar with the names of some of them: Swiss Brethren, Mennonites, and Hutterites. Later came the Amish. They all believed that Jesus wanted them to take a stand against the values of the surrounding culture that was so corrupt. The Church was to be a light to that dark world, so

they set out to recreate in their communal life the original conditions of the disciples around Jesus Christ.

For some of the radical reformers, Christ and the original disciples were pacifists and so following Christ meant rejecting all forms of violence. Mennonites would not and still do not serve in the military.

In that way, they are similar to another later group that was influenced by the Radical Reformation, the English Quakers, and I'm going to talk more about them in a minute. For now, I will say that the Radical Reformation was about Christians taking very seriously and very personally what Jesus was saying to his disciples in that long speech that goes on for over four chapters in John's Gospel, a speech that we sometimes call "The Farewell Discourse."

In our reading for today, Jesus is praying to God to help the disciples survive in the world without him. Even though he hasn't yet been arrested, he is as good as dead. In his mind, he

is already with his Abba, and says, "Now I am no longer in the world." But his disciples are still in the world. And when they have to face the horrors of Jesus' arrest, trial and execution, they are going to be tempted to run and hide and try to forget that they ever met Jesus. They are going to be pressured by friends and family members not to do or say anything that might make the soldiers think that they have ever been associated with Jesus. Once Jesus is crucified as a traitor, the world will turn against them.

Of course, the disciples do run and hide, at first. And ever since then, the followers of Jesus have been tempted to do the same. In spite of Jesus' prayer, it's not easy to be in the world but not of it. The fact is that whenever the culture has found the truth of Christ to be inconvenient, true believers have been tempted to conform rather than risk being ridiculed, arrested, or even killed.

The Quakers were a group of Christians who were hated by almost the entire Christian world because in many inconvenient ways they did not belong to that world, just as Christ did not belong to his world. For one thing, their founder, George Fox, had the radical idea that people didn't need any special person or any special building to connect them to God. Christ was their connection and Christ came to each person directly. Even the Bible was second in authority to what was called "the Inner Light" of God's Spirit, the Divine presence that lives and grows in each one of us.

That was a crazy radical idea for the majority of Protestants, let alone Catholics. On top of that Fox believed in a radical social and spiritual equality. He refused to tip his hat to members of the aristocracy, refused to take oaths of loyalty, and let women preach and serve as missionaries.

For these beliefs, the Quakers in England and in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were persecuted harshly. But they

stood firm against a culture that wanted them to conform, and they are still here today to teach us an important lesson about being in the world but not of it.

There are other groups today that separate themselves from the world, but they do so because they seem to hate the world. I'm thinking of the Westboro Baptists—the ones who picket military funerals carrying signs that say "God hates gays." But hating the world is not what Jesus is about. In the Gospel of John, it says that God *so loved* the world, that God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it.

[John 3:16-17]

Likewise, the Quakers do not hate the world, even though the world has hated them. These radical reformers teach us that you can love the world without being conformed to it. You can serve in the world without being coopted by it.

Let me prove it. Back in the eighteenth century, John Woolman was a New Jersey tailor who could not reconcile the

Quaker belief in equality with the fact that many Quakers supported slavery. So he took his wounded conscience to his local Quaker meeting. Now Quakers don't vote, and they couldn't reach a consensus about freeing their slaves.

Nevertheless, they were willing to support Woolman in his efforts to convince others to do so.

So Woolman began a long career of traveling up and down the east coast visiting with slaveholding Quakers and talking to them about the contradictions between their faith and their practice.

More powerful than his words was his example. He wore un-dyed white clothing because dye was made by slave labor. If he were offered food that was produced or prepared by slaves, he wouldn't eat it. If he discovered that he benefited from slave work, he would quietly compensate them for it.

Woolman did this without hating anyone, without condemning those who held slaves. After twenty years, he

finally convinced the Quakers, who called themselves the Society of Friends, to give up all their slaves, eighty years before the Civil War. [story told by Parker Palmer in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*]

Today, Christians are still loving the world by trying to put an end to slavery, though we call it human trafficking now. In many cultures, even in our own country, finally ending human trafficking would be a truly radical reformation.

But even if the Church confronts the culture on this issue, there are plenty of other ways in which the Church is caving to it. We still haven't learned to be in the world but not of it. We let politics divide us. We let money make too many decisions for us. We live busy, stressful lives and sometimes find it easier to pay people to be Christians for us. We are relieved when someone else is doing the work, when someone else is making the sacrifice. Despite what we say we believe, we neglect

making the time to seek Christ who speaks to our hearts and makes demands of our lives.

Deep down, we know that we need radical reformation. Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are not so unlike those first disciples who were about to lose Jesus. Jesus dies for everyone who doesn't keep their faith alive, who doesn't tend to their Inner Light. If only reforming our lives were as easy as renovating a room. Our problem is not that the Contractor is busy. God is always ready for us. The problem is that we're too busy for God. Thank goodness that Jesus is praying for us, for we need protection from the evil of our own schedules. The truth that we need to be sanctified in is the truth that there is only one way to live *in* the world and that is to be centered in the One who does not belong *to* the world. The word that is truth, the word that we come home to, the word that will make our joy complete is that no matter what we think or do, the world belongs to him. Amen!