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Ezekiel 36:24-28

Reformation in our Hearts

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Ezekiel 36:24-28 The Message

“‘For here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to take you out of these countries, gather you from all over, and bring you back to your own land. I’ll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I’ll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that’s God-willed, not self-willed. I’ll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands. You’ll once again live in the land I gave your ancestors. You’ll be my people! I’ll be your God!’”

“When we gather in worship, we praise God with believers we cannot see. When we celebrate Holy Communion, we feast with past, present, and future disciples of Christ. This faith community stretches beyond space and time. We commune with Christians around the world, believers who came before us, and believers who will come after us.”[[1]](#footnote-2) On All Saints Sunday we remember, we honor, and we are grateful for those who have gone before us.

Today is a day that we proclaim life is stronger than death. As I think about the saints from our church that have joined the church triumphant in this past year, I think of people who loved the church and yet pushed it to be more. Don Sellers was passionate about Greenland Hills being a place where all are welcome. When Greenland Hills began to talk about having same gender weddings in our sanctuary, Don Sellers wanted his vote to be counted. When he became homebound, I would visit him and the first thing he would ask was for an update on the church. Had we taken a vote yet to have all weddings here? He wanted me to know that when we are ready to take that vote, his vote would be a resounding yes.

This past week on October 31 we commemorated the Protestant Reformation of 500 years ago with Martin Luther and his 95 Theses. On this All Saints Sunday, how can the saints teach us to be today’s reformation? I love this passage from Ezekiel. God will gather the dispersed from the nations, return them to their land, purify them, and remove their ‘stony’ hearts, replacing them with a ‘heart of flesh’. God will infuse them with God’s own spirit and render them utterly incapable of violating God’s commands. God will give us a new heart, a new spirit. May we have a heart that is “God-willed, not self-willed.”

A song that we Methodists love to sing is “Here I Am, Lord.” It is a dialogue between God and God’s people. This is God – “I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard My people cry. All who dwell in dark and sin, My hand will save. I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. Who will bear My light to them? Whom shall I send?” And this is our response, “Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night. I will go Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.” The second verse references this passage from Ezekiel, “I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have born my peoples pain. I have wept for love of them, They turn away. I will break their hearts of stone, Give them hearts for love alone. I will speak My word to them, Whom shall I send?” I celebrate the people in my life who have heard God calling in the night and have said that they will go, if God leads them. They will hold God’s people in their hearts.

The saints that we remember today from our church family held us in their hearts. Patricia Aycock loved this place and all of you. Patricia loved well and shined with joy. One of the memories that I have of Patricia that I will cherish was in her last days. She was drifting off to sleep and I made a cross on her head with my finger and said, “You are sealed with God’s love, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And she said in a quiet voice, “Do that again.” She wasn’t afraid of this next step in her journey, she knew that God loved her and that she loved God. I remember when one of the chaplains at Baylor Hospital visited John Pedigo. The chaplain said that a higher power would let John know when the end was near. John said in his dead-pan delivery, will that be by phone or by email? Our saints teach us that life is precious and that every day is a gift.

I think of people who had every right to turn their hearts into hearts of stone. When there was a diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer’s for Steve Jean, he took each day as it came and it wasn’t fair. But with joy he embraced each day. Or with a sudden death like Dan Bracy, his family had to quickly wrap their head around their new reality. There were dreams of growing older together that were not going to happen. We know that life is stronger than death and we celebrate with our saints that they are alive in a place where there is no illness, no memory loss, no pain, no loneliness, there is only joy in the presence of God.

We have been commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the history kicked off by a protestor, Martin Luther and all the other protesters who joined with him through the ages. What our saints teach us and what the Protestant Reformation teaches us is to keep protesting. Protest all that keeps men and women from respect and justice. Protest any form of institution that says it is more important and of more worth than people or the Earth. Protest authoritarians in religion, politics, and economics. Protest hatred, violence, and inequality. Protest our own history when it got it wrong. Protest the exclusiveness of privilege in race, religion, and social class. Protest the separation of heart from mind. Protest the sort of spiritual individualism that isolates and comforts without plunging us into the crises of the world. Protest all that destroys and degrades the beauty of humanity and creation.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The Christian church isn’t perfect because no human expression of the sacred is. The church hasn't always been faithful to its own principles, because human beings can be hypocrites. It hasn't been free from injustice and violence, because of sin. But the church has nurtured millions and millions in faith, lifted the outcast, women, and the poor to dignity and leadership, inspired creativity and goodness, and provided intellectual and social visions unimagined by any other source.[[3]](#footnote-4) The church has been able to do that because of the ministry of the saints.

Mary David Allen was a piano teacher in her life and she knew that beautiful music was about practice. She knew that it is about showing up and putting in the work. Mary David knew that is how the Christian life is as well. God says I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I’ll replace your heart with one that is God-willed. You will be my people and I will be your God.

I don’t remember my first ordination. I remember my second ordination. My second ordination was on June 6, 2006 at First UMC in Richardson, Texas, and Bishop Moncure laid his lands on my hands and prayed, “Almighty God, pour upon Kerry Sumpter Smith the Holy Spirit for the office and word of an elder in Christ’s holy church.” At my first ordination I was at John Sewickley Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. I was six months old. The pastor held me in his arms and placed water on my head as he prayed, “Kerry Susanne, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” That is an ordination that we all share, we are all ordained into the Christian faith through our baptism. If you haven’t been baptized, let me know. You don’t have to be baptized in a Methodist Church, your baptism in any Christian Church counts. We don’t re-baptize because God got it right the first time. Baptism isn’t just a photo op, or a lunch, or an opportunity to get an heirloom gown out. Baptism means something. You can’t be a member of the Christian Church without being baptized, and if you were ever baptized, it counts.

“Through baptism, God calls and commissions persons to the general ministry of all Christian believers. We exercise our calling as Christians by prayer, by witnessing to the good news of salvation in Christ, by caring for and serving other people, and by working toward reconciliation, justice, and peace in the world. This is the universal priesthood of all believers. Through [baptism](http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/baptism-gods-gift-to-us-all)all Christians are made part of the priesthood of all believers. That is the church, Christ’s body, made visible in the world. We all share in Christ’s ministry of love and service for the redemption of the human family and the whole of creation.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

After my baptism, my family gathered around me and laid hands on me as the pastor prayed, “The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Amen.” We are already in that relationship with God, but we can be continually reformed through the Holy Spirit.

To be Christian is to be brought into relationships we did not choose for ourselves, with people who may be very different from us. Our faithfulness to God is reflected in how well we manage to honor the relationships God has brought us into through our baptisms. On All Saints Day we remember Christians of every time and place, honoring those who lived faithfully, shared their faith and pointed us to the way of Christ through the witness of their lives. The saints in our lives inspire us to live in holiness and righteousness.[[5]](#footnote-6)

God says I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I’ll replace your heart with one that is God-willed. You will be my people and I will be your God. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/ask-the-umc-what-does-communion-of-saints-mean?mkt\_tok=eyJpIjoiTldRMFpEYzRaakE1TnpJeCIsInQiOiJheStXNzlDSEMxeFBMcXlUNE9MWFlob0ptMXNwUGkydTB1VnN5YTM2c0NBaU1ETkhHT1ExYVNkWkpzMFZuV1JQclBKS3VaT0JESU9XMFp5VlhmcDJSTUdEWGpHVTJZS21YTmw4V2NSZHRtT2tcLzVRRVBxNTEwRnE2aW1ZSXZiUjcifQ%3D%3D [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Much of this paragraph taken from a Facebook post from Diana Butler Bass: https://www.facebook.com/pg/d.butler.bass/posts/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. From a Facebook post from Diana Butler Bass: https://www.facebook.com/pg/d.butler.bass/posts/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. From *By Water and the Spirit* quoted here: http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/spirit-empowered-church-authorized-united-methodist-ordination [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/ask-the-umc-what-does-communion-of-saints-mean?mkt\_tok=eyJpIjoiTldRMFpEYzRaakE1TnpJeCIsInQiOiJheStXNzlDSEMxeFBMcXlUNE9MWFlob0ptMXNwUGkydTB1VnN5YTM2c0NBaU1ETkhHT1ExYVNkWkpzMFZuV1JQclBKS3VaT0JESU9XMFp5VlhmcDJSTUdEWGpHVTJZS21YTmw4V2NSZHRtT2tcLzVRRVBxNTEwRnE2aW1ZSXZiUjcifQ%3D%3D [↑](#footnote-ref-6)