SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
October 26, 2025
Reformation Sunday
“Royal Priesthood”

Scripture:
1 Peter 2:4-9 The Priesthood of All Believers
Titus 3:3-7 Save by Grace through Faith
Matthew 11:28-12:8 My Burden Is Light

In our Gospel reading from Matthew today, the disciples are hungry, and they eat from the grainfields. Undoubtedly, they weren’t just wanting a snack, but were truly hungry. However, they did this on the Sabbath, a day of rest, and so the Pharisees criticize Jesus for letting his disciples break the Sabbath law. However, Jesus defends them, and then challenges the Pharisees to understand the phrase, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

The same thing happened a few chapters earlier in Matthew, in chapter 9. Jesus was eating with sinners, and when the Pharisees saw it, they objected. But Jesus, at the end of his response to them, says, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

We might presume that Jesus is introducing something new to the people in their covenant with God, but these words were already in the Hebrew Scriptures of the people. The prophet Hosea, in a call to repentance, is criticizing the people for empty rituals that don't include true conversion and repentance of their hearts. Hosea says, speaking for God: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

In hearing these words, we begin to realize that Jesus was calling the people back to the intent and essence and Spirit of their covenant with God; that they had become lost again in rituals and outward behavior, when the true need was inward repentance of their hearts and spirits.

In fact, many of the Old Testament prophets, in their calls to the people to return to God, drove home the same point, that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said similar things.

In anger against empty rituals that are without sincere repentance, the prophet Amos says this for God: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I

take no delight in your solemn assemblies….But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The prophet Isaiah says to the people, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offering of rams and the fat of fed beasts….cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow…..(ch.58) Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them…Then your light shall break forth like the dawn…Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil…then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday….you shall be called the repairer of the breach."

There's plenty more from the Old Testament prophets that sounds like this. And so, we hear in the words of Jesus the voice of the prophets, and ultimately, the voice of God, who desires mercy, not sacrifice. All the rituals and understandings in covenant with God are to be a reflection of what is truly important. When the outward rituals become "the thing," and are no longer representative of the heart and spirit of God, then even the sacrifice of a thousand rams wouldn't please God.

"I desire mercy and not sacrifice," says Jesus, reflecting Hosea, and reminding the leaders what they are supposed to be about in the eyes of God.

Now jump to the 1500s in Europe, when many Christians felt as if the leaders of the Church had again lost their way as to what is truly important to Jesus. Some people went back to the Bible and other early writings of Christians, and found a Jesus and an ancient faith that seemed different from what it had become. This isn't to say that all the message and Spirit of Christ had been lost; only that some of the essence of the faith had been lost, with outward rituals replacing some of what was truly important.

Calls for reforms within the Church were made. In a sense, these reformers were trying to cry out like the early prophets, to come back to the essentials of the faith; the essential understandings and spirit of the faith. Just as Jesus would have the Jewish Temple leaders understand themselves as servants of God, and not the true power of the faith, so the reformers called on the priests to understand who really saves us; Jesus, not them. The reformers said we are saved by God's grace through faith, and not by the priests. The reformers cited the Bible where it speaks of all the people as a royal priesthood; the priesthood of all believers. The Apostle Peter says to all the followers of Christ, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

The reformers and the people believed that the yoke of the church had been overly burdened with man-made rules and understandings, whereas Jesus calls to us, promising that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

The Reformation was a time when many saw themselves in the role of the prophet, calling on the leaders and the people to turn back to the

ways of God; to truly repent in ways pleasing to God; to no longer be confident in outward acts of sacrifice, if they are not joined with true repentance and humbling to God.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 25, Jesus reminds us of what will be truly important in the judgment of God. It says that all nations will be gathered, and the people will be judged in ways reminiscent of what was lifted up by the Old Testament prophets. Jesus will say, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

In an earlier chapter of Matthew, Jesus warns of empty words. He says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." If the heart and spirit are cold, the words of our faith are empty and of no

use. If the heart is filled with the Spirit of God, with a life that reflects such a Spirit, then an invitation to eternal life is offered.

The prophet Jeremiah envisioned what such a time will ultimately look like. He says, speaking for God, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord."

Some Protestants; that is, denominations that arose out of the Reformation period, when they protested and broke off from the Roman Catholic Church, some Protestants have a phrase, "reformed and reforming." This phrase, reformed and reforming, acknowledges their roots in the Reformation, but also acknowledges that the work of the Holy Spirit is not yet done; that we must be ever vigilant to turn back to the ancient roots of our faith, especially the Gospels, and evaluate if we, like others in the past, have perhaps veered away from the essential message and Spirit of God.

This understanding; that the movement of the Spirit is active in every generation, offers us both the right and the responsibility to humbly examine our faith. It is our right and responsibility to be ever vigilant, "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

The Christian faith is forever at work in every generation, calling on us to express the Word and Spirit of God. This is never simple, nor is it easy. But when in doubt, we will be safe by erring on the side of mercy; testing all that we do as Christians with the Golden Rule and with the call to love God and to love others as ourselves. All else in our faith is subject to this.

Holy God, we give thanks for your holy Word, and as your church, we accept the challenge to express your Word and your Spirit in all that we do. Bless us and help us we pray; in Jesus' name. Amen.