

SAVE THE BULLS

Isaiah 1:10-18 / Luke 19:1-10

The high school I attended, put an emphasis on “humanist education,” which means I slogged through years of Latin, classical Greek, and philosophy. What made these—shall we say “dusty”—subjects come alive were my travels as a young adult to Italy and Greece. By visiting a host of temples and churches and sketching statues for my art class, antiquity became much more vivid and I gained the appreciation which my teachers failed to inspire in the classroom. I also became a fan of what were called “sandal movies”— movies about the world of the Roman empire, mythical Greek heroes and Egyptian pharaohs and mummies. *Ben Hur*, *The Robe*, and *Cleopatra* were among my favorites.

A few years ago, the “sandal movie” experienced a renaissance when the director Ridley Scott punched things up a notch or two with *Gladiator*, starring Russell Crowe as the Roman general *Maximus* who led Rome’s campaigns against the barbarians in

Germany—well, against my people. After his victory in a particularly bloody battle, the emperor's son, *Commodus*, says to his father: "I shall celebrate your victory by sacrificing a hundred bulls in your honor." To which the emperor Marcus Aurelius replies: "Save the bulls! Honor Maximus!"

Save the bulls. The emperor Marcus Aurelius wants his son to honor the loyalty of his general and his soldiers rather than to engage in the meaningless slaughter of innocent animals. I don't know if the historical Marcus Aurelius was familiar with the Hebrew scriptures. He might have been. In any event, he sounds a lot like the ancient prophet, Isaiah, who tells his people on God's behalf, "I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or lambs, or goats. When you come to appeal before me, who asked you of this? Bringing offerings is futile. I am weary of them. Instead, cease to do evil! Learn to do the good! Seek justice! Rescue the oppressed! Defend the orphan! Plead for the widow!"

Now, hearing the prophet challenging God's people, which means us, in this way may at first not appear to be the best text choice to read during stewardship season. What were the folks thinking who put the lectionary together? Did they not understand that there are budgets to consider? But on second thought, it really is a good text for exactly this kind of season. It is the right text because it re-focuses us and re-forms us. It helps us put our "tithes and offerings" in a corrective light by reminding us that what we give is not ours to give in the first place. This means the motivation for our giving is not to make us "look good" in God's or our neighbors' eyes or to appease our conscience "for the things we have done and for those we have left undone," as we often say in our corporate confession. As Martin Luther would have put it to us on this Reformation Sunday "we give to God because of what God has given to us," Jesus Christ, God's own Son.

So, re-formation does not mean that we as church have to come up with "newer" or "different" things to do. Nor does it mean that the

church can re-form itself. Since the church is made up of human beings who are finite, the church cannot accomplish re-formation on its own. At the same time, the fact that we are human is also the reason why we need to be re-formed: meaning being re-formed in God's image which we tend to distort like it is a contact sport. Don't believe me, just look at what's going on in the world right now.

The most important thing, which often gets overlooked or forgotten, is that this feat is only accomplished "according to God's Word." And God's word here does not refer to the bible because we have a tendency to distort what we read. For every reading is an interpretation, which means it is subjective. Rather, the church is being re-formed according to the Living Word of God who is Jesus Christ, the "one and only head of the church," as our confessions say.

So, what is Jesus up to these days? I would think he is working on what he has always been working on: calling us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort the dying, work for peace

and justice, and love our neighbor ... you know the litany. These are the same things which Isaiah commended to the Israelites long before Jesus's time and it is no surprise that Jesus follows Isaiah's words because he was a rabbi steeped in the Hebrew texts and practices.

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke's gospel is another case in point. Zach, for short, is trying to impress Jesus with all the things he is giving: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Jesus, however, is not impressed. "You cannot curry favor with God, Zach," Jesus says, "by giving what is really not yours to give. Your salvation is secured because you are a child of Abraham. You have been set free and made whole because you are a child of God."

Last Sunday, Shima Rostami, the executive director of Gateway Human Trafficking spoke to us about their very important work in our community and our nation, and she thanked all of you for your

generous support. As a matter of fact, Gateway Human Trafficking is going to honor Ladue Chapel at their gala in two weeks for its major contribution. Your mission committee is really doing exceptional work as you can see. But there is no need to be proud of our support. According to Isaiah and according to Jesus, such work does not impress God. We simply do what we are called to do. In Isaiah's words, God commands us to "Seek justice! Rescue the oppressed! Defend the orphan! Plead for the widow!" And Jesus reminds us that our mission dollars and our mission work doesn't help us score brownie points with God. We can relax into our mission work because we, too, *are* children of Abraham. Because we, too, *are* members of God's covenant. Because we, too, *are* children of God.

So, I think, whoever chose today's texts for the lectionary chose them wisely for stewardship season. As we contemplate how we can best employ our time, talents, and yes, treasure, we are once again being re-formed by God's Word into the communion of

saints. This is not our gift to God. It is God's ever-recurring gift to us. Indeed, this day, and every day, is the day that the Lord has made. And as God's beloved children, we can truly rejoice and be glad in it.

May it be so. For you, and for me.

Amen.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2022