

**Society Gone Awry**  
Hosea 4:1-8  
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First Central Congregational UCC  
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Wednesday night, during our Confirmation: Phase One class with 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders, the kids created a film of some scenes from the life of Martin Luther and the beginning of the Reformation. We'll have that video playing during Coffee Hour after service so that you can see the entertaining job they did of bringing to life this significant moment in world history and in the heritage of the United Church of Christ.

We do well to remember on this Reformation Sunday that one branch of the ecumenical movement that birthed our denomination was the Evangelical Synod, a group of German immigrants with roots in the Lutheran Reformation.

2017 will be the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, commemorating the moment when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg. By the way, I learned recently that he didn't hammer the theses to the door—he used wax to post them, a far less dramatic event than the way we've generally imagined it.

Currently I'm serving on an ecumenical committee to organize how Omaha and Nebraska will commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I'm serving as the representative of the Nebraska Conference of the United Church of Christ. The organizing committee was called together by the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and, so far, includes representatives from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Mennonites, the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha, and the United Methodist Church. We intend to include Jewish and Muslim neighbors in interfaith events recognizing the effects the Reformation had upon the peoples of all three faiths.

Our committee is guided by four motivations when planning this anniversary.

1. We are going to celebrate, but we are going to celebrate not the divisions and animosities of a half-millennium ago but the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to heal the those division, particularly the significant ecumenical cooperation and agreements of the last fifty years.
2. We will remember and commemorate an event that changed all of us, Protestant and Roman Catholic alike.
3. We will repent for the actions that have divided us, especially the ways in which we have born false witness against our Christian sisters and brothers of other denominations.
4. And finally, we will use the anniversary to explore the continuing path to unity.

A sign of growing ecumenism is my autumn sermon series, exploring the themes of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Praise Be*. The irony is not lost on me that on Reformation

Sunday, I'm preaching from a Roman Catholic text. But if we are a church that is always reforming, something we pride ourselves in, then part of that reform may be opening ourselves to voices we once ignored. Plus, Francis himself is calling for a reformation in this document, for a change in human society and culture. So, on this Reformation Sunday we can join in solidarity with our Christian brother as we continue the on-going effort of reforming ourselves, the church, and the world through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Francis proclaims that "Humanity has entered a new era in which our technical prowess has brought us to a crossroads." We have benefited from this technology in myriad ways, but we also seem to have lost something.

This week was Back to the Future Day, and many of us enjoyed how many of the movie's predictions of 2015 had come true and how many had not. Of course, we don't have flying cars, mass produced hover boards, or World Series Champion Cubs, but we do teleconference with one another, video glasses exist, cars run on alternative fuels, and drones are beginning to become common (unfortunately). The ubiquity of digital communications technologies has been most overwhelming. I've only had a cell phone for ten years, and yet I find it difficult to imagine how I did things before. Of course, these devices aren't phones, they are pocket computers that we can use to instantly contact people around the world and gather information which once took hours of research in a library.

I'm only 41 years old, but the technological advances of my own lifetime are stunning. In recent months I've admired the photos of Pluto that NASA has been releasing. The idea the human mind can create a probe, send it billions of miles away, and broadcast back to ourselves these amazing images astounds me. We are a brilliant species, capable of once unbelievable things.

But, with those adventures and advances also come losses and new concerns. One concern is what we do with all that power. Pope Francis writes that "our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience." He adds, "Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used." Francis warns, "we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it." "Life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence." He does sound like Hosea and the other Minor Prophets at times.

In response to this technocratic paradigm Francis offers a challenge and a call to action and reformation. "There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm." We need time for contemplation and wonder and discussions about the meaning and purpose of existence. We particularly must remind ourselves of the "intrinsic dignity of the world" and its creatures.

So, if we are going to heal the current climate change and environmental crisis, Francis believes we must begin by healing human relationships. We must be open to other people, engaging in dialogue that is respectful and loving. One only need watch the latest political news to see how much this is lacking, which is probably one reason that Francis, when he addressed a joint session of Congress, took so much time to school them on what the

responsibilities of legislators are.

One area where Francis believes we need to change our focus is how we view work. I found this section of the encyclical letter to be very interesting, for one of the advances of the Lutheran Reformation was an appreciation of ordinary life and the theological concept that every person is called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to a vocation. Francis writes that “We were created with a vocation to work. . . . Work should be the setting for . . . rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, [and] giving glory to God.” But, he warns that the meaning of work has lost this rich understanding as we focus on market forces and technological advances. His worry is that as technology replaces much ordinary labor we lose the very activity that brings meaning and purpose to most people’s lives. “Work is a necessity,” he writes, “part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment.” What Francis advocates is business that invests in the real economy—the work of real people.

Recent human culture may have led us down a path that has resulted in environmental damage and huge inequalities, but we can reform ourselves. We can repent. We can change. And so next week we’ll begin to look at what contributions Christian spirituality might make to transforming human culture and healing the problems of the world. Over the next few weeks we will explore the mystery of the universe, the ultimate meaning of life, the common good, and the path to renewal just in time for our season of Thanksgiving.

Last Sunday was most encouraging, as our children led us in worship, focusing on wisdom. They shared with us very concrete issues for which they need wisdom, including bullying and understanding the world. They also shared about how they’ve discovered wisdom in the bible, the church, and our spiritual tradition.

498 years after Luther changed the world, we are raising a new generation of children who may lead us into a new reformation, an era less focused on domination and exploitation, and one focused on wisdom, beauty, contemplation, respect, and dialogue. That is my prayer this Reformation Sunday.