

“Giving as Protest”  
October 31, 2021

Isaiah 55:1-2  
II Corinthians 9:6-15

Sometime during the Church Council meeting back in September, I wrote at the top of my copy of the agenda: “Giving as Protest.”

I’m not sure what in the discussion inspired me to write those words. I do know that that I thought it would not only be a good title for this Reformation Sunday sermon but a fruitful path to explore.

Today we remember our heritage as Protestant Christians, our roots in protest—so let’s start there.

Protestants have always been willing to question authority—including the authority of the church and of tradition. Our faith makes us skeptics. The “No” of Protestantism is important. Our “No!” contains the divine and human rejection of *any* absolute claim made for a relative reality—even, as Paul Tillich emphasized, even if that claim is made by a Protestant church.<sup>i</sup> Protestantism places healthy restraints on the human tendency to deify any system or people. When the church, the state, the economy, or anything else seeks to be absolute, we say: “No!”

The “No” of Protestantism is important and sometimes we must speak it loudly.

But Protestantism also has a “Yes.” By the grace of God—and by God’s grace alone—the unrighteous are made righteous, the sinner is justified (and, yes, I’m talking about you and me here). *That* is our bold affirmation.

Even the word “protest” suggests this “yes,” as its first meaning is “to state positively, to affirm solemnly.” From our positive protest came key Western values—social reform, individual religious conviction, hard work, and the rejection of corruption, hypocrisy, and empty ritual.<sup>ii</sup> Our tradition has produced powerful voices of prophetic judgment and has frequently given birth to great movements of moral protest—saying “no” to what is and also saying “yes” to what, by the grace of God, might be.

We express this positive side of Protestantism in a liberal Christianity that responds to our world and addresses the joys and sorrows and hopes of human beings. This is a faith that helps us to live in the presence of God with all the uncertainty and wonder that we experience in these days.

Saying “yes,” liberal Protestants have consistently cared for the well-being of public life. Out of our belief that God’s love extends to all people, we take seriously, not our own sufferings alone, but the suffering of God in the world. We pray for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the victims of disasters. We also find ourselves helping to rebuild cities; we find ourselves welcoming the homeless, feeding the hungry, and working for policies and practices that would lessen poverty in Iowa City and around the globe. We believe *and* we act—that is the living definition of living faith.

We can embrace our vital tradition with joy and gratitude. We can speak of it with pride. As liberal Protestants we faithfully bring the good news of God's love *to* the world rather than being shaped into the world's mold.

I think that most of us recognize, however, just how difficult it is to live out this tradition of protest, of saying both "no" and "yes." It's easy to get stuck, to stay comfortably where we are instead of faithfully following where God might continue to lead us.

We constantly need reminders.

And this, I think is where giving comes in.

Our giving is protest in both senses of that word. Our giving has a "No" and a "Yes."

When we give, we say "no" to much of what we find in the world.

No to hunger, homelessness, and illness.

No to devastation and destruction.

No to isolation and loneliness.

No to nihilism and despair.

We even say "no" to ourselves in our giving. That can be difficult, but when we give, we set aside our own desires, our own interests—at least a little—so that others can have what they need. As it is said, by our giving we seek to live simply so that others can simply live.

It can be difficult—but it does happen.

The pandemic, of course, makes everything more difficult. Difficulties mean that giving to our congregation is down a little this year—nothing that we are worried about, but giving is down. And as we've started looking at the budget for next year with increasing expenses—insurance will be up, heating costs will be *way* up, and if giving decreases—well, the deficit in our General Fund could be much bigger.

Instead of wringing our hands or slashing budget lines, we must protest.

Our protest must be loud and strong. By our giving we can say "no" to the myth of scarcity, "no" to the fear that there will not be enough.

Let's be honest. We all know that even now, even in these strange, pandemic days, the funds for our ministry and mission are available.

You know, it's like the minister who said: "I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is that we have all the money that we need as a congregation. The bad news is that it's out there in your pockets."

It is, isn't it?

Indeed, one person suggests that “Most members of mainline Protestant traditions could probably double their pledges and hardly notice the difference in their checkbooks.” You know he’s right. But he adds, “Few churches, however, would dare to ask this much.”

Let your giving be a protest! Say “no” and surprise yourself with your giving.

Of course, each of us, as Paul suggests, must decide for ourselves—without reluctance, without compulsion. And after we have done that, after we make that “freely undertaken choice to give” we discover within ourselves the cheerful heart that is so loved by God.

Giving as protest says “no” to the idea that we are what we have, that our wealth is our worth. Giving as protest refuses to accept the world as it is.

And giving as protest also says “Yes.” Our protest affirms that it is by God’s grace that life is given to us and it is by God’s grace that we are able to respond to that gift.

Earlier in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul expressed it this way: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” That is to say, we have received the resources to draw upon even in these challenging times.

Giving as protest affirms God’s grace—a grace that allows us, who have all received so much, to be generous in return. This is, Paul tells us, an “indescribable gift.”

Even if we can’t fully describe this, we take our stand near Paul and with him shout: “Thanks be to God!”

The positive protest—the *yes*—of thankfulness leads to a liberal sharing. Gratitude moves us toward a desire that an ever-expanding number of people would enjoy all the good things of life. *And*, Paul adds, “You will be enriched.” Your own life affirms the truth of what Paul says.

We used to encourage people to “Give until it hurts.” But we found out so many had a low threshold of pain.

Instead, recall your own past generosity. My guess is that your grateful giving has left you better off, *enriched* in many ways.

We are Protestants. On this Reformation Sunday—and, really, throughout the year—we are those who *protest*, who say a strong “no” when necessary, so that our “yes” can be better heard. We *protest* so that we can follow Jesus Christ not only in those ways that have been known for some time, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in those new ways that are being made known right here in our midst in our time.

From the start, the Christian faith, following the resurrected Christ, has been about looking forward, discovering the new truth that God is revealing for our time. In spite of our tendency to make an idol of the past and the ways things were in any imagined golden age, Reformed Protestant faithfulness to the living Christ turns our ears toward the new truth that God is speaking and turns our eyes toward the light that shines from the future.

We are constantly invited by God to go further.

Say “No!”

Say “Yes!”

Protest.

Let your giving take you to new and unexpected places.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*

<sup>ii</sup> Back cover of *Protestants*, by Steven Ozment