Today is Reformation Sunday.
Which you all, undoubtedly had marked on your calendars, right?
Or, maybe not.
Some of you might be wondering instead,
"What is Reformation Sunday?"
Reformation Sunday is the last Sunday in the month of October.
It's a time when churches in the Protestant Reformed tradition --
a tradition which includes Congregational churches --
celebrate our heritage.
It is also a day for affirming some of the core
theological convictions that were reclaimed
during the Reformation,
and have been the guiding lights
of Protestantism ever since.
--that our salvation comes as the gift of God's grace,
and is received through faith,
not by our own good works or righteousness,
-- that the Bible Is our guide to knowing God,
-- and that the mission and ministry of the Church
is shared among all members--
not just ordained ministers or priests.
It is also a day for remembering that the Reformation
was not just something that happened
five hundred years ago.
The Church of Jesus Christ always needs to be re-forming,
or else it will re-settle into re-peating old mistakes.
The necessity of being a Church
that is always conscious of the need to be attuned to
the guidance of the Holy Spirit
is captured in the UCC slogan:
God is Still Speaking.
It is also echoed in the quote on the cover
of your bulletin this morning.
Which offers a simple definition of the sharing of our faith as
just one humble beggar telling another beggar
where to find bread.
It just so happens that both the scriptures for today
are about beggars.
The Gospel reading tells the story
of a beggar named Bartimaeus.
He can't support himself because he is blind.
Which is obviously not his fault.
Except, that, in the thinking of that time,
it kind of was his fault.
Because disabilities like blindness,
along with other misfortunes,
were considered an indication that
you were not on God's good side.
One day in the life of Bartimaeus is much like any other,
the hours devoted to begging by the side of the road.
Until one day that turns out to be like no other,
when he hears a great commotion going on.
Someone explains to him that
Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples are passing by,
attracting a noisy crowd of people.
Bartimaeus had apparently heard of Jesus
because he calls out, "Jesus, Son of David,
have mercy on me!"
Bartimaeus knew Jesus’ reputation for showing
mercy to people like him, who are in need.
But the crowd tries to shush Bartimaeus.
That just makes Bartimaeus shout even louder
"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"
In a scene reminiscent of one of those moments
when Pope Francis stops his vehicle to let
someone on a crowded avenue approach him for a blessing,
Jesus stops in his tracks,
and asks that this man be brought to him.
Jesus asks Bartimaeus,
"What do you want me to do for you?"

Everybody probably expected Bartimaeus to ask for a handout.

If you're a beggar like Bartimaeus, that's what you do.

He doesn't ask for a handout, though.

A handout he could get from anybody.

He asks for something only Jesus could give him.

His sight.

He asks to be made whole.

To be free of his disability
so that he could care for himself
without relying on the charity of others.

For the first time in a long time,
Bartimaeus doesn't have to beg
to get what he needs.

Jesus gives him what he asks for,
based on nothing more than
the faith he has shown in Jesus.

Imagine being blind for however long
Bartimaeus had been blind,
then getting your sight back.

And the very first thing you see
when those eyes of yours are reopened,
is the face of Jesus looking back at you.

That's what Bartimaeus must have seen.

It was a sight that turned his life around.

From then on he followed Jesus.

Seeing Jesus with his own eyes,
instead of just hearing about him,
was a life-changing moment for him.
The other beggar we get to meet today, was named Job.

It was easy to see that Bartimaeus was a beggar, because he didn't have anything to his name except for the clothes on his back.

But Job -- Job seemed to have everything he could possibly want.

He was rich and healthy.

He had a good family and a beautiful home.

But then Job had the absolute worst day that anyone ever could have.

He lost everything.

His home, his health, his family, everything he owned.

It was a riches to rags story of epic proportions.

All at once, Job was a beggar, sitting on a pile of ashes by the side of the road.

Before long, some of Job's friends come by to console him.

But they aren't very comforting.

You see, their understanding of how life worked was based on the principle of cause and effect-- rewards and punishment.

So, to help Job make sense of what had happened to him, they urge him to search his soul and confess what wrong he had done to deserve the calamity that had come on him.

Job, himself, had always seen life the way his friends did.

It was a viewpoint that worked pretty well when he was on top of the world.
He could find comfort in knowing that
God favored him with good fortune because
he was a righteous man.
But, he discovers that this philosophy
has some holes in it
when looked at from the bottom of the barrel,
instead of the top of the world.
The more his friends talk about his guilt
the more he protests his innocence.
And the more he protests,
the more they try to shush him.
Like the crowd tried to shush Bartimaeus.
Eventually Job goes over his friends' heads
and brings his protests straight to God.
The way Bartimaeus shouted over the crowd
to get the attention of Jesus.
And, just as Jesus stopped short to respond to Bartimaeus,
God drops everything to hear Job and respond to his need.
What Job asks, is also to be given sight.
Not physical sight, but understanding.
Job is beginning to comprehend that most of what
he had been told about God all his life
did not match what was happening to him now.
What happens next is that God gives Job
eyes to see God as he never had before.
Job sees that God is far too big and transcendent
to ever be tamed by human doctrines about him.
Job's reaction is to confess,
"I had heard about you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye has seen you."
Up until then he had heard about God,
but now he had seen God,
and like Bartimaeus,
his life and his world would never be the same.
So, what does this all have to do
with Reformation Sunday?
For one thing, the Reformation opened people's eyes
to see that a second hand knowledge ABOUT God
based on doctrines and teachings
can never be a substitute for a
personal relationship WITH God.
Secondly, it opens our eyes to how the Church of our time
needs to continue reforming itself
so that it does not stand for it when
the the cries of the needy are silenced,
the way the disciples did
when the crowd tried to silence the cries of Bartimaeus.
So that when the hopeless turn their eyes to the Church
they see the compassionate face of Jesus looking back at them
Or, so that the Church doesn't join in
blaming the poor, the disadvantaged, or the despised,
for their circumstances,
the way Job's friends pointed the finger of judgment
at him.
So that the Church remains faithful to its mission
of proclaiming salvation, and
of restoring people to wholeness, as Jesus did.
As an always Reforming Church,
may we hear Bartimaeus and Job,
two beggars, telling us --
we who are beggars in our own right --
where we can find the Bread of Life for ourselves.
And where, when and with whom
to share it.