

Again & Again: We Are Reformed

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:20-33 Jeremiah 31:31-34
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The authors of the Lenten resource material I'm using as a guide this season, entitled "Again & Again: A Lenten Refrain" by a group called A Sanctified Art (founded by three Presbyterians), use today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah 31 and the Gospel reading from John 12 to focus on the theme, as stated in this sermon's title, "Again & Again: We Are Reformed."

I immediately thought, that's perfect because we Presbyterians are in the segment of Protestantism called the Reformed Tradition. A key mantra for us continues to be "**the church reformed, and always reforming** [or, "and always to be reformed"] according to the Word of God." This follows the guidance of reformer John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, in the mid-1500s, to whom we Presbyterians trace our roots.

Originally, this mantra was a call to action in order to **return to the original roots of the Christian faith, stripping away all that organized institutional religion had added on throughout the centuries**. It was like pulling out a packed drawer from a dresser, dumping everything out, and putting back just the things that were necessary. In this instance, it was those thoughts, ideas, and practices that had biblical roots, not the accretion of ideas, dogmas, and practices that had been dumped into the drawer over the ages.

This particular approach to the reforming process neither blesses preservation of the traditional for preservation's sake, nor change for change's sake. Its purpose was, and is, about living into a more authentic faith and way of life – one guided by the ways and teachings of Jesus. But to be honest, I found it a bit hard to make a connection between this theme of reforming and being reformed and the passages of scripture from Jeremiah and John. So let's take a closer look.

The broader section of Jeremiah from which the verses in chapter 33 come foretells the restoration of Israel, providing comfort and hope to those in Exile. The passage speaks of God making a "**new covenant**" with the people (v.31). But unlike the covenant which the people broke when they were brought out of the land of Egypt, this new covenant won't be written on stone tablets or parchment, it will be written internally on their hearts. The heart, back then, was thought to be the center of a person's intelligence and will. What will be "new" (or renewed, reformed) will be the inner life a human beings: God will write the law within us, such that knowing God will be second nature. This new covenant, which we celebrate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, was fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus and the Presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

Moving to the passage from John 12, Jesus announces that his hour has come for him to be glorified. The gospel writer puts on the lips of Jesus, "**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit** (v. 24). This is a reference to Jesus' impending death,

resurrection, and ascension, as recorded in John. Writes one biblical commentator, "God's self-giving love for humanity is so strong that God will undergo our rejection, even to death, and then transform that rejection into new life and flourishing for the sake of 'all people'" (12:32). This suggests **God can and does work through even the worst we can do, redeeming and remaking what seems irredeemable into the service of new life.** That is basically the message of Easter itself.

In making the connection between these passages of scripture and the much-needed reform in church and society in our day and age, the Rev. Anderson, the biblical commentator for this Lenten resource material writes:

We desire for God to write on our hearts so that God's law can re-shape and reform us from the inside out. Reformation is a journey of letting the old fall away for something new to emerge, of returning to God's words over and over, of being drawn into the heart of God. This is the process of justification and sanctification; transformation must be internal and communal.

The year 2020 will be remembered as one of pestilence, pressure, and protest. Even as a global pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized people, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and others joined the already-long litany of Black lives lost to police violence and the imaginations of armed civilians. **Everything was changing, but too much remained the same.** The unrest was almost constant.

She continues, "Consider then what must have been brewing in Jerusalem the week Jesus was crucified. Our reading jumps ahead to that week and the moments after Jesus' protest march into Jerusalem (more on that next week [on Palm Sunday]). Imagine that the air is charged as an occupied people remember God's liberation of their ancestors from another empire. They're aware of Jesus' wonders and are anxious for restoration. As his lore grows and visiting Jews from the diaspora seek him out, Jesus telegraphs the vision. In order for the seed to bear fruit, it must die. Those who follow him must go where he goes... **Change, even when welcomed, means death.**"

Rev. Anderson then shares an experience of being the pastor of a church that was in the process of closing down for good. "I once had the unenviable task of pastoring a church through dissolution. We realized that change would happen either with us or to us. We could die to some things so that we could live to others, or we could hold onto what is and die with it. Only one of these is a faithful way forward. **Again and again, we are being reformed. The process is uncomfortable, but the status quo is untenable. When change happens with us, what could possibly take root and flourish?**"

Today we mark the one-year anniversary of the transition to virtual worship here at College Hill. What a year of transformation it has been for us as a community of faith, and for each of us in our own individual lives and families. Where and how have you seen reformation taking place?

Returning again to the teaching in John 12:24, **what must die in order for new fruitful life to emerge – for you, for us as a community of faith?** Here at the church, what practices, even beliefs, are crying out to be reformed? Now is the perfect opportunity for us to undertake reformation.

During the decade even before the remarkable changes brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, those who study the sociology of religion noticed that Christianity

has *already* entered into a new and profound reformation. Back in the fall of 2010, our Book Study Group here at College Hill read and discussed what was then a new book by Harvey Cox, a Professor of Divinity at Harvard, entitled, *The Future of Faith*, (HarperOne, 2009). The premise of the book is stated on the back cover.

There is an essential change taking place in what it means to be 'religious' today. As religious people shift their focus to ethical guidelines and spiritual discipline – not doctrine – we are seeing a universal trend away from hierarchical, regional, patriarchal, and institutional religion...

Doctrines and dogma are giving way to new grassroots movements based in community, social justice, and spiritual experience.

He goes on to lay out his understanding that we are transitioning from what he terms the "Age of Belief" to an "Age of the Spirit".

In her 2012 book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, author and religion professor Phyllis Tickle asserts that about every 500 years, the Church goes through a "giant rummage sale"—a time of rapid reformation in which many cultural and religious practices get reconsidered and tossed out. That places us in the midst of a contemporary reformation, 500 years since the Protestant Reformation in Europe, spurred on even quicker by the events of the past year. What do you imagine religious practice will look like in 50, 100, or 500 years? Many advise, however, that when in the midst of reformation and rapid change, it's better to concentrate more on short-term planning than on traditional long-term planning.

Like never before, this past year has certainly been a test of just how agile we can be, and will continue to need to be. As a community of faith we will continue to be challenged to face change, to engage in reforming our ways of being the church and the people of God as we discern God's guidance and mission for us. What will that look like? I'm not talking down the road somewhere, I'm talking about next month, and the month after that. Not knowing exactly where things are heading, and how to get there, is filling a majority of pastors I know, including myself, with a good bit of anxiety. And yet, as people of faith in God's Sacred Presence, there is also a sense of excitement and hope in what will be. Therefore, we face some profound questions on which to reflect and take action.

- What things do we need to keep?
- What things do we need to let go of?
- What in the current status quo of things (here at the church, as well as in our personal lives and in society itself) will we choose to resist in our work toward change and equity?

Yes, some things must die in order for there to be new life and abundant fruit. I can't think of any better lesson for the season of Lent.

Amen.