

Being Formed and Reformed

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Luke 18: 9-14

This past week we gathered for a tea at Cloverwood. Cloverwood is one of several retirement facilities where a significant cluster of Third Church members resides. Every year, the Third Church Board of Deacons hosts teas at these facilities whereby we gather, visit with one another and catch up on what is going on at the church. I cherish these times a great deal and am grateful to the Deacons for pulling them together. Some of our members at each location are able to be out and about and make it to church. Some are not, and these occasions provide the opportunity for members to see one another, even if they live in relative proximity. They build a sense of community and connection. And as much as I like individual and personal visits, such a group gathering has a certain sense of joy and bonding.

The members who attend express thanks for the opportunity. But every time I walk away from such a gathering it is I who feels the thanks, and gratitude. I am grateful for these women and men, for their decades and decades of faithful living, and, for many, their decades and decades of faithful commitment to this congregation. Many have been connected to this place for 50 or 60 years, or more, which is absolutely inspiring to me.

But what is more inspiring is their lives themselves. To a one, each person has, over their decades, faced joys and sorrows, highs and lows, and has persevered with determination and resilience and hope. And even now, none are finished products. Each is learning and growing and developing, responding to new life situations and moments, some welcome, some not, some expected, some not.

I am grateful in so many ways. We will get to the historic context of this Sunday, Reformation Sunday, in a moment, but what strikes me about this group of members – or any and all of you, any and all of us who are seeking to live each moment and day and year and life faithfully and fully and well – is your willingness to be open to where the future leads and to follow that path, to take that journey, with hope. You have learned, and I hope that I can learn, that we are constantly in the process of being formed, and reformed, and transformed.

Sometimes we fight and resist and close ourselves off to the new. When we do, when we hunker down and close ourselves off, we stagnate and decline. When we are open, when we allow ourselves to embrace new moments and opportunities, welcome or not, expected or not, we can thrive and develop.

We are not, when we are born, or when we are 16 or 30 or 50 or 65 or 90...we are not finished products. To be that would be boring. To know that we are not finished products, but are ever works in progress, is exciting and joyful and hopeful. To know and embrace that we are constantly being fashioned and refashioned, or, to use the language of the day, formed and reformed, not only is exciting and joyful and hopeful, but it reflects our true natures, who God would have us to be. And to gather so many, whether at a retirement facility or at a church, of those who are embracing such formation and reformation and transformation, and to gather the power of such transformation both within and beyond a community, is to make history indeed.

It is one of my favorite Sundays, Reformation Sunday, the Sunday closest to October 31 when we remember that initial bold act of Martin Luther. Luther was a priest in rural Germany, and his experience with the church, to draw the connection, was that it *did* think it was a finished product and was not open to change. So he nailed a set of protests and affirmations on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany and a movement was born, the Protestant Reformation. We are the heirs of that moment and that movement.

Others followed, including John Calvin a generation later, who took Luther's theological and organizational protests to another level. Many others followed. John Knox, John Witherspoon.

Back in an earlier era, when Catholics and Protestants were more wary of one another, Reformation Sunday had a different feel to it, a kind of "how great it is that we are not them" feel to it. I am glad those days mostly have passed. Even the Catholic Church, soon thereafter all of this originated, realized that change was needed and something called the Counter Reformation happened. Ironically, over time, the Protestant movement, like all organizations and institutions, became calcified and ossified, so that additional protests needed to happen, new iterations of that original Reformation.

A church – whether the big church out there, or our Presbyterian family, or this particular community, will die if it does not adapt and evolve. We are not finished products either.

At that gathering in Cloverwood we spent a bit of time pondering what the church looked like 50 years ago and what it looks like now. Noted similarities and noted differences. We should pay attention to both. Clay on the wheel changes shape and form, but it is still clay.

How can the church be open to the change it needs to make in order that we are reformed and transformed in the same ways that our senior members have discovered ways to evolve and adapt?

On Reformation Sunday we remember those who have led such change in the past, but we make a critical mistake if we think such change is limited to the past. Our forebears have led us to this point; now it's our turn.

To move back and forth between the individual and communal, we know that as friends, as neighbors, as citizens, as family members, as workers, as people of faith, new chapters are being written in the books of our lives every day. The nature of what is being written is dependent on how open we are. Will we be closed down and locked down and resistant to change, and therefore stagnating and declining, so that each new chapter is simply a copy of an old one. Or will we be open and welcoming, so that as we live day by day and lifetime by lifetime, we will embrace life and make a difference to others and the world.

Keep playing that interaction between the individual and communal in your mind.

Jesus tells another parable, not quite as troubling as some on recent Sundays, but pointed nonetheless. Two approaches are compared and contrasted. One who is well off and respected and apparently has his life together. He is accomplished and seemingly generous and very full of himself. We can equate him to any of us, or any organization or institution, who perceives its act fully pulled together once and for all time. And the other man, socially suspect, religiously unsure. He knows he does not have it all pulled together. The first perceives himself fully formed; the second knows himself fully to need reformation and transformation.

Charles Cousar writes about the tax collector: “He personifies the one essential prerequisite for praying – an honest recognition of our place before the justice and mercy of God.” (*Texts for Preaching, Year C*, page 575)

It is that moment of recognition that I so appreciate. It is difficult and never easy, often painful. It might be an institution, like the church or the government or the Boy Scouts, who we recognize today – if we believe that change is never needed, we will miss great opportunities. Change will happen anyway, and it will pass us by and leave us watching by the side of the road.

Or it might be an individual, you or me, un-open to change, resistant even to the ways our lives evolve. We end up missing out, or more so, closed off from living the full and free life God intends us to live.

That’s why I am grateful for Reformation Sunday. It reminds us not how great we are, but how in need we are of God’s reforming and transforming spirit.

We don’t like that word, Spirit, because it feels too emotional and unpredictable. But believe it or not, we have a very high doctrine of the Spirit. It might not manifest itself in emotional demonstration in worship, but it does manifest itself in new ways of understanding, new ways of interpreting, new ways of serving, new ways of being church.

That’s why I am grateful for Reformation Sunday, and for reformers of all kinds, deep past and immediate present, who recognize and keep recognizing the Spirit’s formative presence in our lives, who took risks, who made stands. We are the better for their witness.

We celebrate the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, and rightly so, but we are never quite sure what to do with that story of the wind and flame and all those voices speaking in different languages. It doesn’t feel particularly Presbyterian. But in essence *this* day is *that* day, a day of the Spirit, the forming and reforming and transforming Spirit, who is about the business of changing lives and changing the church. If we, like those who have gone before us, and the wisest among us now, can only be open to it. Amen.