

<Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Luke 14:25-33>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

What does it mean to you to be "reformed"?

It might bring to mind the reality that we are good Presbyterian Calvinists, reflected both in our theology and our worship as well as in the design of our sanctuary and space, but I would not fault you if that was not what first came to your mind. I would offer that, for myself, to consider being reformed carries with it a negative stigma, along with semi-unpleasant flashbacks to my youth, because to be reformed means that there was something in the initial effort that did not work. There was something in the first attempt, some flaw or imperfection which required the need to reform, and I can't think of that dynamic without thinking of unpleasant hours sitting in art class.

I never liked art class. Well, that's not true; at some point I loved it, and I've always loved art - the expression and engagement with beauty in our world, in our lives, visible to us all around. At a young age, I wanted to be able to capture a degree of that beauty, to be an artist who could manipulate the medium to reflect the beauty that I saw. But my attempts never came out the way I wanted them to; they never quite lived up to the potential I saw in my mind's eye.

I admired others who seemed to be able to so effortlessly engage art as an expression of the world around them. My friend Jesse, for instance, was a more than capable artist and, then later on, a potter, able to fashion great pieces with his hands and his attention. I admired his ability as an artist, and I resented my own inability to do likewise. And so I grew to dislike art class, not because I disliked art but because my own attempts felt so flawed and imperfect, so constantly in need of reforming which did not yield the hoped-for results.

As I grew, this perspective journeyed with me and, unknowingly, influenced the way I approached many realities within my life, including how I connected with and related to the church. Finishing seminary, one of my primary perspectives was that I, as the minister, would be expected to enter into a relationship with a congregation and provide them guidance and direction for reforming and reshaping, that I was the one - the primary, solitary one - who needed to fulfill that expectation. Such a perspective was never quite made by the church, explicitly, but it was never dismissed, either. As you might imagine, this perspective was also not accurate or faithful.

This is nothing new. A little more than five hundred years ago, a group of devoted and faithful individuals began a movement which would grow into the Reformation, which was not an attempt to replace the current Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it was an attempt to bring the church back to its foundations, but which led to the growth and realization of the Protestant movement, a movement which was propelled in no small measure by the church in Scotland, and a minister named John Knox. Yet here, too,

was a perspective that something had become flawed and needed to be reworked. And again, this was not something new.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, and told him to go on a field trip. He was to visit the house of the potter down the street. Observing the potter at work, Jeremiah was encouraged to understand and interpret this reality: the people of God were as clay, which could be shaped and reshaped as necessary. And this reality has two implications which are fundamental for us, even today.

The first implication is the one that we often understand: that clay can not only be shaped but reshaped, when it begins to turn out the wrong way. I would dare say that we have learned this lesson, have internalized this implication, and often with such a negative stigma that what we truly carry with us is the pain of disappointment more than the opportunity to live into something greater. Because it is an opportunity, so long as we remember this crucial aspect: clay is meant to be reworked and reshaped. It isn't a medium in which one attempt is made and it's perfected. Clay is a medium which requires attention and energy, which yields under varying degrees of pressure and guidance, and which can go through multiple iterations before being decreed as ready for the next steps, such as firing and glazing.

Clay is meant to be worked, and reworked, in the process of creating; it is designed and understood to not just be formed but reformed as well, and that in such a process love and commitment is shown, passion and vision realized. The first implication to remember is that we, as the people of God today, are not intended to be a finished product fresh off the assembly-line but rather a constant work in progress, being formed and reformed.

The second implication, just as crucially important but often glossed over, is that we are not the potters. We are not the artists or the creators. And speaking from my own experience, I think we as a people often forget that. We think we are the only ones responsible. We become so accustomed to creating and building, designing and fixing, so used to taking responsibility for a thing in this world that we forget that, in the world of God, we are not the creator but rather the medium being worked.

But this second implication is just as evident in our reading from Jeremiah. For those hearing Jeremiah's words, it would automatically have connected them with the story of creation in Genesis 2. The verb used to describe the work of God, *fashion*, is the same one used to describe the intention and work of God when creating, forming and fashioning, humanity from the clay of the earth. It isn't used again until after the resurrection of Christ.

God is the creator, the artist, and is not threatening to reform or refashion because of a flaw or imperfection, but rather is committed, with love and intention, to see the people of God living into the fullness of what God has envisioned and imagined. It may seem dire, but the reality is God's intention and commitment to lovingly see the people be who they are created and called to be, fully.

This dynamic is an ongoing reality. It was true for the people of God who would be hearing Jeremiah's pronouncements; it is true for us, today; and it was true for the crowds who followed Jesus.

The crowds, along with the disciples, have now witnessed miracles and heard teachings. They have seen how Jesus interacts with those in need and responds to those in leadership. And they have a notion that they want to follow. But in order to do so, Jesus needs them to understand that to follow, also, is to be reformed. Reformed from the expectations and norms of the world and into the expectations and norms of the kingdom of God. There will be a cost to this and for some it will be too high a cost to pay, one that the people are not ready to bear. But the implied truth in this reforming is that the cost of such discipleship is better than the loss of such discipleship; the ratio of reward to risk is very favorable, but to follow means being reformed into the image of the disciple, defined and determined by such a calling.

This calling, which is common to us, still, today, is not one of a specific work or effort, but rather is the calling to faithfully entrust ourselves to God's hands. And while we are called, and commit ourselves to respond faithfully, the calling is never about us; it is always about God. These texts, our stories, have never been about us, they have always been about God. They are about who God is and what God is doing, reflected in our lives and living. They are about what God says, to and about this world, how God is forming and reforming, creating and re-creating this world, and us, in it.

The question before us, as we are reformed again in this day, as we celebrate and remember our ecclesial heritage and history, is how we will continue to recommit to God's calling. It is an ever-changing, ever evolving dynamic reality, which begins anew each time we remember that we are not the ones responsible for the vision, but we are responsible for living into what has been envisioned. What might our lives, our church, our community and presence look like if we were to robustly pray, each day, to be reformed and reshaped into what God envisions and needs us to be?

On this Kirkin' of the Tartans Sunday, as we begin our program year and recall our own heritage, as we heed the call and come again to the Table of our Lord, I would offer us such a prayer to use as a congregation for the year to come, that we might be formed and reformed for the work of God, as the people of God. Let us pray:

*"Creating and re-creating God, mighty and merciful, you have envisioned us and made us according to your will. So fashion us this day that we may be what you need us to be, who you desire us to be, in and for this world. Formed according to your will, may we proclaim in love and joy the fullness of life which has been manifest through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Reform us, always, to your needs and your Kingdom, in all times and places, by the work of your Holy Spirit. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen."*

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*