

“Reformed – Always Reforming”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Reformation Sunday – October 29, 2017

**Jeremiah 31: 31-34**  
**Matthew 22: 34-40**

In my lifetime, I have been very fortunate to have travelled to many different parts of this world. I have been blessed to visit places such as India, Mexico, Hawaii, and several countries in Europe. As early as eight-years-old, this world was expanded for me by my parents spending two months in Scotland one summer on a pulpit exchange. I realize how unusual my experience is, and how humbled I am by the blessings God has given to me in this regard.

In a real way, I have always had a deep connection and understanding of what it means to be Reformed and Presbyterian. Not only am I a fifth-generation Presbyterian minister, I have also spent meaningful time in places that were significant to the Protestant Reformation. I have visited St. Pierre Cathedral in Geneva, Switzerland, where John Calvin preached and taught and pastored his flock. I have worshipped at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, Scotland, where John Knox preached and brought the Reformation to Scotland. As anyone will confess who has been on pilgrimages to holy sites, there is something transcendent and spiritual when you know that you are standing in a place where history took place.

Today is a day to celebrate a moment in time, an event that led to a movement, and the Spirit of God moving in women and men to reform Christ's Church. There were certainly individuals who called for reform of the church prior to 1517. But when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenburg, Germany, this act is often commemorated as the start of the Protestant Reformation.

As we mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation today, it should be more than just an opportunity to look backwards at a historical event. It also should be an occasion to look forward to what God will do with this church that is “reformed, always reforming.”

Perhaps to understand more fully the significance of the Reformation for us today, we need to comprehend what was truly happening in the sixteenth-century in Europe. If you took Gary Shaw's class last winter, then you got an all-encompassing understanding of that context! But in a nutshell, what was going on five centuries ago? At that time, there wasn't a Roman Catholic Church; there was just the Church. It was led by the pope, and authority resided in individuals within the church. Faith had become interwoven with human greed, including the idea that one could buy his or her way into salvation. Worship was conducted in Latin, no matter where the church was located. It was a very different setting than what we know today.

John Krull is the host of “No Limits” on WFYI Public Radio, and he recently had a panel discussion on the Reformation. Krull writes: *Faith, of course, still is a*

*powerful force in human life, but 500 years ago, when states rose and fell with (the) birth and death of heirs to thrones . . . and wars and disease shattered communities, the church provided continuity, stability and security for people who had little power and even less comfort.*

*To challenge the church's authority – as Luther did with his 95 theses – was to challenge the foundation of Western society. He touched off an earthquake, the aftershocks of which continue to be felt to this day.*

*It is hard – and maybe even impossible – for us today to understand the force of that moment. At a time when life was short, hard and often terrifying, the promise of an eternity of kindness and succor made faith as vital as – and maybe even more vital than – breath, blood, water or food.*

*In the popular mind, Luther's rebellion was about instances of corruption, the selling of indulgences and other abuses of ecclesiastical authority.*

*It was about those things, but it also was about something much more profound, much larger. It was about the individual's relationship to God.*

*In the simplest terms, Luther's protest was against the interposition of intermediaries between human beings and their creator. He (and the Reformers) wanted to tear down as many fences separating men, women and children from God as (they) could (<https://www.wthr.com/article/krull-when-faith-shook-the-world>).*

Indeed, the Reformation was grounded in a desire for each individual to have his or her personal relationship with God nurtured by the church, not mitigated through the church. That is why Luther, Calvin, Knox, and so many others believed that grace was not something to be earned or bought; it was a free gift given to all by a loving God through Jesus Christ.

And so, in the reforms that these and others instituted, barriers were torn down between the people and God. The Bible was translated into native tongues, and people began worshipping in their own languages. Authority and power was not held by an individual, but was held by the diversity of saints in the congregation. The preaching of the Word and the celebration of the two sacraments which Jesus himself instituted – baptism and communion – were the focus of the church's worship.

There are times in history, in people's lives, where God speaks a word that spurs them to act. The Reformers heard God's voice, acted in faith, and because of their faithfulness, we are here today. If it had not been for their "rebellious" acts, as they were labeled then, there would not be a Presbyterian Church, or any other Protestant denominations, today.

I believe God speaks to God's people through other people as the Spirit moves in their hearts and minds. And perhaps the Reformers heard these ancient words of the prophet Jeremiah, first spoken at a similar time when God's people were without hope or a sense of promise. For in that moment in Israel's life, the people were in exile and felt abandoned by God. But the prophet spoke a word of promise and hope – which very well could have also been spoken to the church five hundred years ago:

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with (my people). It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors . .

. But this covenant . . . I will put my law within them, and I shall write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31: 31,33).

And lest we forget what that new law is, Jesus reminds us in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. In response to a lawyer’s question as to which is the greatest commandment, Jesus states that the greatest commandment of the law is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22: 37-38). On this Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate such a momentous anniversary, these two scriptures are indicative of what was at the foundation of the Reformers’ actions. God was forging a new covenant with God’s people, a covenant that centered themselves on God and on loving one another as Christ has loved us.

(Taking out some play dough) This may seem a little childish, but one way I have thought of the Reformation is like this Play Dough. You see, many times we look at “reformation” or “reformed” and hear history or tradition. But if you inserted a hyphen between “re” and “form”, you get another meaning. We are being re-formed into something different, something new. It’s the same substance, just like this Play Dough, but instead of its original form, the church has now been re-formed into a new shape, for a new purpose. (show new form of Play Dough)

Not only was the church re-formed five hundred years ago, it has continued to be re-formed by God’s Spirit, and that is one of the reasons I have always felt deeply proud and connected to be a Presbyterian. We do believe strongly in tradition. But we do not believe that tradition is to be worshipped. We believe that God continues to speak to us and re-form us into the hands and feet and heart and mind of Christ we are called to be at a particular time. That is why all God’s people are welcomed as leaders in the church today. That is why we have sought to confess our sins of the past as it relates to racial injustice, and seek to forge positive change in our culture where inequality exists. We have been, are, and will continue to be re-formed into the disciples that Christ needs us to be.

And so, as we look forward, what is God re-forming us to be and do in Christ’s name at John Knox? How are we being shaped, molded, and called to lead and serve in the weeks, months, and years ahead?

One thing I appreciate about this church is that it is not afraid to let go of a program or an activity if there is no longer energy or enthusiasm around it. I believe that is the mark of a healthy church that is re-forming itself for the next thing God in store. But one of the things we must guard against is not becoming complacent in looking for that “next thing.” It’s great to be able to have the courage to say it’s time to stop doing something we’ve done for a while. But it’s a two-step process: we must then be willing to allow God’s Spirit to re-form us for that next outreach or mission or purpose. If we don’t follow through on that, then we have failed to honor God.

So, what new things are we being called to, and how do we need to be re-formed in Christ’s name in order to serve? Last spring, we concluded the tutoring program we had hosted for area school children, as there was declining participation. So, what’s next? What are we called to do next to affect change and

growth in the lives of children and youth in our community? Are we called to go into the schools ourselves? Are we called to partner with Nueva Creacion in a new way? What do we need to do to be re-formed for service and mission to those who are at the most risk in our society?

We have had an adult mission trip over the last few years, but this year we didn't have as much interest for a specific trip. We chose not to have one, as that would simply be forcing the issue. So, what's next? An opportunity to challenge ourselves in a new way. Through Lisa Crismore's experience earlier this year, we wish to forge a partnership with a church in the Dominican Republic. In February, a group from John Knox will travel to the Dominican Republic and visit, learn, listen, and begin the process of forging a relationship in Christ with these women, men, and children. Do you feel called to serve in this way? Are you being re-formed to take this step of faith? If you do feel called, talk to Lisa today - I know she would love to hear from you.

This is not only Reformation Sunday, but it is also Stewardship Sunday for us at John Knox. Later in our service, you will be invited to come forward and place on this table your gifts and pledges of financial support for Christ's work in this place in 2018. In light of this, I would ask: how is God re-forming you to give back what God has first given to you? What in your life do you need to reshape and reorient so that no fences are standing between you and your Creator? Are you ready to re-form your giving so that God's Spirit might work in and through us to accomplish these and so many other acts of grace in Christ's name?

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with (my people)." Five hundred years ago, the Spirit of God moved to re-form the Church in a new way. Let us continue to be heirs of that covenant, re-forming ourselves into the disciples Christ calls us to be - today, tomorrow, and for five hundred years to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.