

"Reformed, Always Being Reformed"

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¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

(Jeremiah 18:1-6)

I need to say from the outset that I am not a potter. I know this because I have tried before. It did not go well, but it did give me an even greater appreciation for what skilled potters are able to do. When it is done right, the throwing of a piece of pottery is an elegant, even mesmerizing process of creation. In the beginning, the clay must be fixed and centered perfectly so it does not spin off when the wheel starts turning. Then it must be raised up gently but firmly, constantly maintaining the center and a good level of moisture. Only gradually and patiently can the clay be molded into its final form. During this time of shaping, the potter cradles the clay in both hands. Each hand counterbalances the other, so that pressure is exerted on both the inside and the outside of the pot. To change the shape, the artist increases pressure on one side or the other, pushing out or pulling in, but always in a way that keeps the counterbalance of pressure very close... for if the balance shifts too far in one direction or another, the center will be lost and the pot will founder.

Even very talented potters will tell you that it does not always go according to plan. Even if great care is taken, some pots get a little off. That is why, close to their wheels, many potters keep a big trash can lined with a plastic bag where they can throw their spoiled, broken or incomplete projects. They call the contents of those bins "reclaim," because it is clay just waiting to be reclaimed -- moistened, mixed and refreshed so the potter can try again.¹

The prophet Jeremiah uses this ancient image of an artist at the potter's wheel who is taking old clay and making it new again to remind us of an important truth about God. It is the same truth that most of the preschoolers who are here this morning could easily recite to us, because they have already learned that beloved song of childhood, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Humanity began as dust of the earth shaped by the artistic and ingenious hands of the Creator, and we remain firmly held by divine hands that continue to mold us and shape us. Each day that we spin around on our planetary home, each circling year of our tours around the sun, we are constantly cradled by the loving hands of a God who has plans to make us into a beautiful work of art -- hands that are not quite done with us yet.

This truth is embedded in one of the primary affirmations that we make as Presbyterians. During the Protestant Reformation, which celebrates its 500th anniversary this very year, some committed Christians were concerned that the church was a pot that was beginning to spoil in God's

¹ Eric Smith, "The Habits of Potters: The Lectionary for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost," <http://www.patheos.com>, on September 8, 2017.

hands. They were convinced that we were losing our center and balance in the Word of God, that we were starting to skew toward idolatry in unhealthy ways. But they were also convinced that, if we could be courageous and faithful enough to allow God's hands to reshape us into something new, that we could still be reclaimed -- that we might not only fulfill our useful purpose, but even become graceful and beautiful in the process. So we say, in our *Book of Order*, that "*the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance.*" In other words, we as the people of the church of Jesus Christ remain ready and willing to be reshaped and remolded as God sees fit. Eventually, we adopted an old Latin phrase to describe what we mean. "The church," we say, "affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, "The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God."² The phrase simultaneously reminds us that it is God who has shaped us into what we are today, and it is this same God who will continue to mold us into the people we need to be tomorrow.

On one hand, it is a very reassuring image. If we feel vulnerable and need to be propped back up, if we want to be reminded that our imperfections can be smoothed over with heavenly hands, that no matter how bad things go, we can always be reclaimed from the bin and given another chance, then we are very happy to be secure in God's hands.

On the other hand, we may not be as comfortable with the idea that things are always changing. A few years ago my father, who has been an elder in the Presbyterian church for a long time, came back from an officers' retreat. One of the things they had talked about was this Presbyterian phrase, "Reformed, Always Being Reformed." He confessed to me that he had never really liked this part of Presbyterian polity. He didn't want to believe that the church is always reforming. To him, this seemed to suggest that we are somehow trading ancient truth for something newer or more fashionable, or even that we are letting the world control the church. I don't know if I convinced him or not, but I explained that I didn't see it that way. Being reformed doesn't mean we are changing God. Malachi 3:6 rejects this plainly: "I the Lord do not change," it says. "That is why you, descendants of Jacob, do not perish." No, when we say that the church is always being reformed, we are saying that we are the ones who are changing.

Taking a closer look at this concept of constant reformation, there are three things we can say about the changes we observe in the church. The first is a recognition that we are not the agents of this change. The verb used in the phrase is passive, and that is intentional. God is the architect, artist and arbiter of this change. The prophet Isaiah makes this abundantly clear. "*Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, 'What are you making'? or 'Your work has no handles'?*" (Isaiah 45:9). No, Lord, "*you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*" (Isaiah 64:8). In short, we are the ones *being acted upon*. We are being changed by God, molded like a malleable pot in God's hands.

Secondly, we confess that one of the primary ways we are being changed and shaped by God is through scripture. Unfortunately, this part of the saying is often dropped off for sake of brevity, just like I did in the title of this sermon. In truth, we do not just say we are "being reformed." We say we are "being reformed **according to the Word of God.**" If the admonitions of holy scripture don't make us squirm every now and then -- if God's Word does not pinch us or challenge how we've been living or what we've been saying or how we've been treating one another -- then we are not reading it correctly. After sitting with one congregation through a particularly powerful passage of scripture, and then observing their lack of response to it, the author Annie Dillard was prompted to write this:

² Book of Order, F-2.02

*"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."*³

We, as the church, are "always being reformed" because we are always falling short of the glory of God. There are always rough patches in our lives that need to be smoothed and reshaped by the vision of justice and righteousness revealed to us in God's Word.

Last but certainly not least, we are "always being reformed" because sometimes we just flat out get it wrong. The church's response to the issue of slavery is a primary example, but there are many others. Try as we might, we can and do err in our interpretations of scripture. Sometimes we get the interpretation right, but we choose to ignore the plain meaning of a passage because it seems too difficult or costly. Or we might mistake tradition for truth, displacing divine things with human things. It's called idolatry, and we humans are very, very susceptible to it. Ever since a fearful Aaron got impatient and decided to make a calf made of gold, we have been busy finding new and different things to worship other than God. This is why we need to affirm the idea that we are always in need of some reformation -- that we are happy for the hands of God to always be upon us smoothing out our flaws, keeping us centered and holding us in proper form for the services and functions we are called to perform.

And so we have gathered together on this Rally Day to recommit ourselves to the idea that we are clay in the hands of a great artist. Because we remain in the safe and skilled hands of the master, the turning and changing and collapsing and reshaping is not something we should fear. Instead, we are invited into the joyful realization that we truly need the help and guidance of those hands if we want to become the beautiful creations that only those hands can render. God is always busy remolding us into a vision of what humankind has always meant to be. God is always busy reshaping us so that we might be useful and contribute to God's reign on earth. And God is always recasting us into something eternally beautiful -- unique and singularly wonderful creations that the world has never seen before and will never see again.

Thanks be to God that we have already been reformed into the Body of Christ, and thanks be to God that we are always being reformed in accordance with the Word of God. **Amen.**

³ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/april/35.31.html>