

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)
Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda
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May 28, 2017
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Acts 1:6-14

When they had come together, Jesus said: you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

John 17:1-11

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. May they may be one, as we are one.

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I was raised in a Baptist family. Don't blame me! I had no choice. As someone said, God chooses your family. But, thank God, we get to choose our friends.

I chose the Presbyterian Church. At the time I didn't realize how lucky I was.

I'm not a big fan of denominations. I wish the church were organically one. But it isn't. And being "spiritual without being religious" is hard to do alone. We need community. So if you got to stand and grow in some place, the Presbyterian Church is a pretty good place.

This morning in my next to last sermon I want to express my gratitude for the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed tradition of Christian faith it embodies. By more than a few twists of fate I landed in the Presbyterian Church. I didn't start there.

My father mistrusted colleges and universities. He considered them bastions of communism. He wanted me to go to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

My mother didn't want me going to anything less than a real college. So on the advice of the only college educated person in our Baptist church, I went to Wheaton, an evangelical liberal arts college in Illinois. I took the road less traveled for a child of fundamentalism. A twist of fate.

I majored in philosophy and minored in political rabble rousing. Near the end of my senior year in 1969, I asked my faculty advisor what does a philosophy major do. He said I had two options: go to Vietnam or go to seminary and study theology.

I considered those options for all of 15 seconds. Which seminary, I asked.

Well, he said, most Wheaton graduates with a theological interest go to Dallas Theological Seminary, but in your case, given your political leanings, I recommend Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. It's evangelical but bends toward the social justice side of the gospel

I chose Fuller. Dallas, I found out later, turned out Jerry Falwell types. Whew! Another twist of fate.

At Fuller, I happily read and studied theology only to find out that seminaries turn out ministers. So I had to apply for a church internship. Unhappily, I applied for a youth director position in a nearby Baptist church.

The minister interviewed me and then told me he would not hire me. Why not, I asked. Son, he said, you're no Baptist. In fact, I'm not sure you're a Christian.

I went back to the job board and spied an opening at Mt. Olive Presbyterian church in Whittier. It specifically wanted someone of a liberal bent. I got the job. Another twist of fate.

I met the part-time church secretary, a certain Betty Egan who had a lovely daughter named Paula. Another twist of fate. But nothing would come of that for another six years.

So let us not digress!

My supervisor, the Rev. James Douthitt, had recently lost nearly half his congregation over his public advocacy for non-discriminatory, open housing. I instantly admired him, his courage and convictions, which I learned came, in part, from his Presbyterian theology.

I discovered there was more to the church than fundamentalists and evangelicals. My heart and mind were strangely warmed. And so I went all in, passed the ordination exams and was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in September 1973.

Mr. Douthitt had just retired. So I was asked to stay on for a year. At the end of that year I suffered a shocking personal loss. The door on my future slammed shut.

I left Southern California wrapped in a cloud of gloom, wandered up the west coast, through Canada, the States and Europe. I was a nomad with no direction home, searching for something I couldn't name. It would take me a long while and many miles to discover that though life is hard, grace abounds.

In November of 1974 I returned from Europe. I hung out with a cousin in Landover, Maryland for a few days and then left to visit my parents for Thanksgiving in Youngstown. Instead of taking the direct way home, I took a meandering way.

That route brought me over the Potomac and Shenandoah into West Virginia. With no place to call home, on a whim (and thinking there might be "hobbits" in these here parts!) I rented a room in an old farmhouse outside of Harpers Ferry and got a job pruning apple trees.

I couldn't escape the gloom. And I couldn't see church in my future at all.

And then, out of the blue, I got a call. I answered and agreed to do "spot preaching" in this church until the congregation of 35 or so souls could find a real minister. Another twist of fate.

At the time I had no clue that the Spirit might be gathering a people, the lost and forsaken, to do a new thing in Shepherdstown. And, as it turns out, it's no accident that new thing arose in a church grounded in the Reformed tradition of Christian faith.

So let me tell you what I like about this tradition.

Its 16th century founder John Calvin, was a French Catholic expelled from France for his dissenting views. So right off, *you gotta like that!*

Calvin was not a priest. He was a scholar. He saw that the church had corrupted the founding practices of Jesus. It was time for reform by which he meant a return to its roots in Jesus and the Judaism that shaped Jesus.

Unlike other Protestant reformers Calvin embraced Judaism. He was no anti-Semite. He embraced the Hebrew prophets, which is one reason he opposed tyranny.

Calvin knew it was not enough to have Jesus in your heart. Society needed good laws. And thus Presbyterians historically—far exceeding their ratio in the population—would serve in Congress, other civil agencies and public institutions working for the “common good.”

Calvin debunked perversions and distortions of the gospel. And in case you haven't noticed, we have carried on that work. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. The church reformed and always being reformed.

For Calvin the church was not the building or the clergy. The people, he said, are priests for and with each other. There would be no clergy per se, only ministers as “teaching elders” (presbyters), wearing academic gowns not priestly vestments.

Calvin believed in education. Beside every church, an academy, he said. We Presbyterians may love our books too much; but it's far better than flying by the seat of your pants.

Not surprisingly, Presbyterians founded dozens of colleges and universities in this country. And they would be early and persistent advocates of free public education. And that's one reason you'll not likely ever see a Presbyterian parochial school. We believe in education for all. The common good.

Calvin deeply respected the Bible. But he would say as we have come to say: *We take the Bible too seriously to take it literally*. He respected the Bible but did not, like so many fundamentalists and evangelicals, worship it. He also trusted science, human experience and the mysterious nudging of the Spirit.

Calvin mistrusted authority. He saw that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. *Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God* would become a Presbyterian slogan. Resistance is in our DNA.

Calvin instituted a form of government that excluded bishops, limited pastoral authority but also restrained congregational or mob rule. Elders, deacons and ministers were elected by the people, but another council, the Session or Presbytery served as a check and balance to determine fitness for office.

By the way, Alexander Hamilton and other founders were deeply influenced by Presbyterian polity. In fact, the Electoral College, a Presbyterian type notion, was instituted just in case the masses elected someone “unfit” for the office of president.

But let us not digress.

Finally, Calvin never claimed the Reformed Church was the one and only church. It was, he said, just one branch on a very large tree.

Maybe that's why Presbyterians were at the forefront of the ecumenical movement last century. And that is also why we here today embrace other religious traditions. This is an inclusive tradition. We are one branch on a large tree with deep roots.

That large tree is rooted in a Trinitarian understanding of God and reality, which means the heart of reality is a community of love. True, its original formulation was “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” But that merely reflects the times not the timeless truth it expresses. The heart of all things is dynamic love. It is being and becoming, which is to say: *to be is to be in love*.

I know many—if not most of you—are here not because this is a *Presbyterian Church*. You are here because you have found a spiritual community grounded in love and radical hospitality.

But I want you to know: you are not here by accident. You were called and gathered to be a community in whom and through whom God continues the work and witness of Christ—reformed and always being reformed according to the Word and the Spirit, the spirit that sets our hearts on fire as you can see in the flames licking the foot of the cross on the Presbyterian seal.

So in the days ahead, please let the rich, deep soil of this tradition give you wisdom, strength, courage, hope and great joy.