



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

October 25, 2020

Reformation Sunday
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 8:31-36

When my boys were little, my mom would come over to watch them each Sunday night while I was with the youth group. I would get home in time to tuck them into bed, and we would take a few minutes to talk about what they had learned at Sunday School that morning and other events of the day, and then say their prayers.

One Sunday evening, when Daniel was about three years old, we were going through our Sunday night routine, and he told me that in Sunday School, they had learned the story of Jesus' daddy being thrown into the swimming pool. Perplexed, I probed a bit further. "I don't remember that story from the Bible," I said, "Tell me more about it."

"You know," Daniel said excitedly, "the story where Jesus' daddy Joseph was out playing with his brothers and they threw him into the swimming pool." "Oh," I sighed, relieved that the very capable Lakeside Sunday School teachers were not adding their own apocryphal stories to the Bible, "you mean the story of Joseph's brothers throwing him into a pit because they were jealous? No, that's not Jesus's daddy but a different Joseph."

"Okay," Daniel shrugged. And then he asked, "But if Joseph was Jesus' daddy, why do we call Jesus the Son of God?" With that question, even this minister changed the subject, kissed her son good night, and turned out the light!

Preserving and passing on our faith to our children is important to every parent who is a person of faith. We read the stories to them, share the practices of worship and prayer, try to set a good example, and teach them what it means for our beliefs to inform and guide our lives. And in these days that feel so uncertain and are so troubling, it seems especially important for us to ground ourselves and our children in the firmness of our faith. How else can we make sense of this crazy world? Where else can we find secure footing when everything around us is shifting so quickly? Who else can bring us peace in the midst of the chaos, other than Christ?

These times of pandemic, social unrest and political turmoil, disinformation and isolation, have created great anxiety for us as individuals and communities and

as a nation, leaving us fearful of the realities before us and unable to see what lies ahead. All of this, of course, comes in the midst of what was already a period of cultural shifts and technological advances which have caused every significant institution of our society, including the church, to change at lightening speed.

Lest we think ourselves alone in these experience or our time unique in its challenges, the words of Jeremiah from today's Old Testament lesson call out to remind us that those before us have walked similar paths and that the God who created the universe will not forget his children in the midst of our anxieties and fears:

Hear these words from the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

In the history of our faith tradition, indeed in the history of humanity, periods of change and challenge have been the rule more than the exception. In her book, *The Great Emergence*,¹ theologian Phyllis Tickle recounts how, about every 500 years or so, the Church undergoes a period of major "house cleaning" of the institutional trappings it has amassed, taking stock of those things it treasures and discarding those that have become burdensome or unnecessary. Certainly this process has been imperfect and over-corrections have sometimes had to be righted, but it has also led to much-needed and beneficial reforms that have helped the Church to survive and adapt in order to share the Gospel to every place and language and culture.

Between the 4th and 5th centuries after Christ, we can look at the alignment of Christianity with the Roman Empire under Constantine, the subsequent fall of Rome, and the rise of monasticism as the first such period. The Great Schism occurred about 500 years later, forming the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Orthodox tradition in the east. Almost five centuries after that, Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the

¹Phyllis Tickle. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Baker Books, 2012.

church at Wittenburg, setting off a reaction that would spark the Protestant Reformation.

And here we are another 503 years later, well into another fundamental shift in how we understand the shape of the Church and its role in society. There is one important difference in this period of great change when denominational loyalties are breaking down and institutional influence seems to be waning, and that is our global perspective and ability to communicate through technology. I think we can all agree that the sheer volume of information at our fingertips, as well as our ability to spread it across the globe almost instantaneously can be both a blessing and a curse. And while we can surely see how these tools are being used to harm and manipulate people through distortion and disinformation, it is also true that having access to a vast range of information and perspectives can create opportunities for building community, understanding new ideas, and solving problems, if we will but use them wisely.

In our lives and in our churches, then, we have a choice to make: Will we become entrenched in old habits and assumptions and further divided by prejudices because we are afraid of change? Or can we learn to approach these days with open and hopeful hearts for what God might be doing among us, embracing uncertainty as opportunity and fixing our eyes on all that there is to gain instead of dwelling on what we have lost?

On this Reformation Sunday when we commemorate the period of challenge and upheaval that gave birth to the very tradition we call home, we not only look back to the events that brought us here but also walk forward in faith to the possibilities that are before us, with hopeful anticipation for the ways God can continue to re-form us if we have open hearts and willing spirits.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke his words of re-formation and hope to the Israelites as they also stood at a crossroads in their own time. All seemed lost when Solomon's temple was destroyed and the people were forced into Babylonian captivity. Among Jeremiah's contemporaries, the Psalmist would lament, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4), and the writer of Lamentations would agonize, "How lonely sits the city (of Jerusalem) that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!" (Lamentations 1:1)

How well we know this kind of heart-sickness in our own time! How deeply many of us have yearned for the time when churches were multiplying and the influence of our faith tradition throughout our culture was evident and

strong! How often in the past nearly eight months—EIGHT MONTHS!—since we have gathered in our sanctuary, we have wondered whether we could sing the Lord’s songs and offer our prayers scattered as we are! How well we know the desire to fill this and other beloved places that were once full of people, but for our own sake and the safety of others, we must for now remain apart. How much we have longed for the simplicity and security of familiar routines and normal activities!

As people of faith, if we listen closely, we can hear, swirling in our own anxious spirits among these doubts and questions, echoes of God’s promise spoken through Jeremiah: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*

Jeremiah’s words, first spoken to a distraught and broken people, come to us in our own time of change and unrest as a promise that God has not left us to fend for ourselves. Indeed, on this Reformation Sunday, they are a reminder of the truth of God’s eternal promises to walk with and re-form his people of every age, even and especially through our most challenging days.

The truth of that promise continued to reverberate through the faith of the Hebrew people until it was embodied in the of the One named Jesus, who, just over 500 years after Jeremiah, would undertake his own mission of spiritual and institutional “house cleaning” and would stand on the very ground for which Jeremiah yearned to declare to the descendants of Abraham, “If you are my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Hearing again Jesus’ promise of freedom and remembering Martin Luther’s bold act of claiming that freedom for all believers may just have the power to release us from our fears of whatever lies ahead and give us cause to celebrate the steadfastness of God’s promises through the ages.

The new covenant which, by grace, God imprints in our hearts, opens us to the possibility of being freed from anything that has kept us bound to our old ways of doing and being so that our brokenness can be re-formed and our lives renewed.

As we have been reminded so often in the past eight months, our church is not this building or the traditions and programs housed here, as much as we love them. Perhaps these months when we have been prevented from *going* to church have created the space for us to reimagine

what it means for us to *be* the Church, the living, breathing, vibrant, Body of Christ in the world and for the world.

I don't know about you all, but I love HGTV! My children would probably say I'm addicted to it. My favorite shows are the ones that feature contractors and designers who are restoring their own cities and neighborhoods by renovating old, abandoned houses. In part, I think I'm attracted to these shows because the older I get, the more I become like my paternal grandmother who saved every pie tin, twist tie, and margarine tub that came into her house, "just in case she ever needed them" and because she couldn't stand to waste anything.

To feed my house-restoration-show obsession, I have come to love a show called "Good Bones," which features the mother-daughter duo of Karen Laine and Mina Starsiak Hawk who are revitalizing their hometown of Indianapolis, one rundown house at a time. Karen, the mother, is particularly known for rummaging through whatever seemingly useless garbage has been left behind at the houses they are restoring to uncover items that can be repurposed and incorporated into the beautifully renovated properties so that some part of the home's original story is preserved and passed on to its new owners.

Almost invariably, in each episode there is a point at which Mina pokes fun at her mother for the extremes to which she will go to trudge through garbage, comb through mountains of junk, or painstakingly dismantle items which appear to be useless or damaged beyond repair. And just as often, it turns out to be Karen's seemingly absurd project that is the most beautiful and meaningful feature of the finished home.

Perhaps we can see Karen's tenacity, creativity, and care in restoring these hidden treasures as a parable for the way God re-forms us, searching through all the mess and chaos of this world to claim us, painstakingly stripping away layers of tarnish and removing the worn out pieces, and then, from our brokenness, restoring us to renewed life and purpose so that, by faith, we can continue to tell the story of God's goodness and mercy for those who would come behind us. Our faith, then, is not an heirloom to protect and admire out of arm's reach, and it is not a scrapbook that enables us simply to cling to the past or lament what has been. Our faith is the journey of living into our place in God's ongoing story—the arduous, humbling, liberating work of shedding our brokenness so that we, individually and collectively, can be re-formed into useful yet beautiful vessels suitable for carrying the good news of God's amazing grace. And this is the mystery of our faith: That our re-formation becomes the very means by which God works to transform the

world and make evident the kingdom of God among us. This is the hope of renewal, the gift of redemption, the promise of resurrection.

I wish I knew how long it will be before we can gather again for worship. I would be dishonest if I didn't admit that I'm anxious about how this challenging time might affect us, but, in faith, I am also hopeful for the ways God can use these circumstances to help us imagine bold new ways to be the Church in this place. Though there is much we will want to preserve and resume as soon as we are able, if we are the disciples Christ has called us to be, we can move into the future without fear, freed to welcome the possibility and promise of how God can re-form us for the challenges of being the Church in our own time and for generations to come. Thanks be to God! Amen.

October 25, 2020

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of the circling years, whose faithfulness spans generations, your grace and mercy continually astound us. Through Christ you have entered our world, walked where we walk, shared our limitations, been touched by our joys and sorrows. We are grateful that we need hide nothing from you because you know our longings and desires, our fears and temptations. Your goodness to us is beyond our comprehension or our deserving. For every gift which comes from your gracious hand, O Lord, we offer our thanks and praise.

God of this very moment, you are present everywhere: in crisp, colorful fall days which brim with your creativity, in the loving faces of family and friends, in the words and music which stir our souls, and in our prayerful solitude. Make yourself known to us as we seek to follow you. Help us to move beyond the convenient boundaries of our lives to touch the lives of others. Speak peace to our restless minds, so that your ways become our ways and Christ's call our fervent desire.

God of every day that is to come, grant that we may live, move and have our being in constant awareness of your grace and blessing. Wherever we find suffering, empower us to bring healing. Whenever we encounter need, move us to respond with compassion and generosity. Whoever must live in the threat of violence, to them, enable us to speak a word of peace. Whatever we see or hear that diminishes the dignity of another, grant us the courage to work toward the reality of your justice and hope. As we travel the journey of the days you have given to us, guide our footsteps that they may follow those of Christ, and so fill us with your Spirit that your love and mercy will be evident in us and through us. Through Jesus the Christ who is our Light and our Hope and who is Lord of all, we pray. Amen.