

October 29, 2017 – Reformation Sunday

TEXT: Ephesians 2:1–10

TITLE: Semper Reformanda

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

My sermon title may have been a mistake. If your goal is clear communication, having a title in Latin is likely a bad idea. At the very least it is going to require some explanation—and at the worst it means you’re subjecting folks to a lecture on the nuances of 16th century church history. On the other hand, people love slogans. We love short phrases that help us remember the important things in life. So, on this Reformation Sunday, the phrase of the day is “semper reformanda”—which means “always being reformed.”

The Presbyterian Church is also known as the Reformed church. We arose during the 16th century period of “reformation,” in which the teachings of the Catholic Church were reformed in terms of some of their doctrines and practices. In time, a rallying cry for the Protestants became “ecclesia reformata”—we are the Reformed church—“semper reformanda”—we are always being reformed.

Now, the phrase “semper reformanda” may not be what you think of when you decide to attend a Protestant church. You may have your own idea of what it means to be a Presbyterian. For you it may mean singing certain hymns or having assigned seats on Sundays, or bringing casserole dishes with your name taped on the bottom to church meals; or only making Jell-O according to the proper liturgical color of the season. (Right now that would mean lime Jell-O.) But I promise you there is more to our faith than that. So instead of doing a church history lecture about Presbyterianism, we are going to be guided by the last three verses of the passage from Ephesians 2 I read earlier. And hopefully the point you’ll come away with is this good news: *We are daily being reformed by a God who loves us, a Savior who is ever with us, and a Spirit that is creating a future for us more wonderful than we could ever deserve.*

Vs. 8: *By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.* We have been saved by grace. Question: Saved “by grace” as opposed to what? Answer: Just about anything else you can think of. We are not saved by things we do or the type of people we are. We are not saved by our name, our nationality, our zip code, our church affiliation, or the language we speak at home. And, in terms of justice issues, we are not saved by our wealth, our educational awards, our race, our gender identity, or our physical and mental capacities. Whatever we might think gives us an advantage over someone else simply doesn’t matter in God’s eyes.

Think of it this way. Many, if not all of us, worry about whether we are successes. We sometimes feel guilty because we’re not doing more—not doing enough to lead a good life that is pleasing to God. Too many of us have “little people” on our shoulders whispering in our ears that we’re not good enough. It may be a critical voice heard from a parent while growing up, the voice of a teacher, a spouse, a tiny devil telling us we just don’t measure up. Please feel free to brush off your shoulders regularly. The only

voice that should be whispering in your ears is the one saying, *God knows you, loves you and is with you. You've been saved by grace—it's a gift from God.*

Which leads to **vs. 9**—*This gift is not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* To boast is to claim something is the result of our own efforts, and to seek credit for ourselves alone. John Calvin and the reformers knew this was a dead-end street that led nowhere good. Instead of self-elevation, Calvin affirmed a healthy version of self-denial contained in this simple truth: *In life and in death we belong to God.* We are not our own; we belong to God. All of us.

“We belong to God.” That may be one of the hardest phrases to hold onto in today’s troubled world for one simple reason: In recent generations we have gained the capacity to destroy all life. Going back to the last world war, we now have the military capacity—the nuclear capacity—to destroy life on earth quickly. And sadly, through our environmental and industrial choices, we also have the capacity to destroy the world more slowly but just as effectively.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre sat in cafés in Paris after World War II, contemplating where the human race was heading. In one essay, he wrote this: *From now on, we must always take into account the knowledge that we can destroy ourselves at will, with all our history and perhaps life on earth itself.*¹ Sartre then created his existentialist philosophy—a bleak perspective that said whatever hope humankind may have is dependent on us alone. We have to look clear-eyed at our mortality and the mistakes we have made, and decide to make the best of things.

We are now like gods. While we cannot totally create life, we can potentially destroy all life. Thinking about that makes us uncomfortable, so we trust in human answers to that harsh reality. We trust in stockpiles of weapons; we trust in diplomacy sometimes and militarism to a far greater degree. We trust in laws on the books and if not laws, then prisons, to protect us. We trust in savings accounts and pension funds, and when those aren’t available, we work at least to make sure we have enough money even if it’s at the expense of someone else. When we think about the future, whatever human creation we might name as the source of our confidence will be no true answer. It will only be a hollow boast—a frightened and flawed answer to our existential angst.

Faith tells us to step back from that approach and take a deep breath. By faith we are led to trust something else: *In life and in death we belong to God.* Now add to that the words in **vs. 10**: *We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* Sartre with his cigarettes and apricot cocktails couldn’t see a horizon beyond the end of this mortal life—this fragile human existence. But there is so much more to be seen.

Scripture says “We are what God has made us, created in Christ for good works.” Do we still sin and make mistakes? Yes, daily. Do we have the capacity to destroy life and diminish others through our fears, militarism, racism, sexism and nationalism? Yes, sadly we do. The capacity for destruction may have grown over the past generations,

but the human reality behind these flaws has been the same since the dawn of time. And none of that should move us to despair.

We awake each morning, opening our eyes to life in all its potential. Our first phrase should be this: *In life and in death we belong to God*. That is our hope, our joy and our strength. Whatever else may claim us, God takes precedence. Then as we prepare to welcome the day, we remind ourselves of this: *We are saved by grace, which is a gift of God*. Nothing in this world can demean us or take away our reality as God's child. No demon on our shoulder has real power over us. For there is nothing we have to do to be held in God's favor or receive God's grace. All we need is already beside and within us—our identity in God, our salvation in Christ through freely given grace.

So what comes next? What is our rallying cry as we head out to face the world? It's good ol' Latin: *Semper Reformanda. Always Being Reformed*. This slogan challenges both our conservative and our liberal tendencies. We have conservative moments when we believe that the only good things are old things—that we should conserve the past and keep doing things exactly like we've always done them: Stay away from new technology; Hang onto the good ol' days; Only sing the old hymns and never change the church carpeting—important stuff like that. In the same way, we also have liberal moments, believing that only the new stuff has any value—that change for change's sake is always good; that we have to move with the times, follow the crowds, get rid of old things like denominational names, offering plates, newsletters sent in the mail, and Sunday sermons that don't allow for Twitter feedback.

To our conservative and our liberal tendencies, we say "Semper reformanda"—always being reformed. It means that we are always in the process of living into a more authentic expression of faith every day. It means going back to our roots—to scripture, prayer, and community-connections that have made the church the active body of Christ ever since Christ himself walked on earth. And it means looking forward to what, by God's grace, is still to come—the real possibility of change, reform, healing and new beginnings—not just for us as individuals, but for us as institutions, nations, as the human family all over the world. Scripture tells us, "*Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation altogether*" (2 Cor 5:17). That happens dramatically and incrementally. It is a new beginning and a daily re-formation. And remember: It is a gift; it leads to good works as a response to that gift; and it is all part of God's plan prepared long before to be our intended way of life (Eph 2:10).

This message is true whether you are Roman Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant. Even as we celebrate our Reformation anniversary, we find strength in this good news that is for all people: *In life and in death, we belong to God. We are saved by grace, a wonderful gift from God*. And *semper reformanda*—we are always being reformed. Because God doesn't give up. Christ will never abandon us. The Spirit blows and transforms until all life finally reaches its God-blessed horizon. May this Latin rallying cry of old give you hope and peace this day and always.

AMEN

¹ Sarah Bakewell, At the Existentialist Café, 2016, p. 11.