

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 4, 2024

So, this is our our last Sunday in the gym and also the final Sunday of of our summerlong series that we've entitled Theology 101, Back to the Basics of Faith. We have spent the entirety of the summer reflecting on some of the most important Reformed theological doctrines. We've gone through week by week reflecting on a different important one. We finish...we conclude this Sunday, today, with one of the words that has been repeated every single week, but we haven't actually taken a deep dive into it, and that is Reformed. Okay we've talked about Reformed Theology, the Reformed Tradition. We've even talked to reference the Protestant Reformation, but we haven't actually talked about what that means. And for some of you who grew up in a Presbyterian church or a Reformed Church of another tradition, you might be very well acquainted with it, right, but others of you we know have come to this place, been called to Idlewild from other traditions, and you might not have had a deep dive into it. So we're going to do that this morning. I do encourage you to go back and spend time in these last few weeks before school begins and summer really comes to... summer travel comes to an end for us; go back. We have studied together the Trinity; we've studied Sin, Salvation, Revelation, Justification, Sanctification, Providence, Predestination, the Church, and last week Hope. And we think that if you spend some time in the Word of God proclaimed here from the pulpit over in the sanctuary or here, you'll learn a little bit more about what it means to follow Christ in the Reformed tradition. So as we begin this morning, I'll open us with a word of prayer and then a brief history together. So let's pray.

God, you are present at creation moving over those waters, drawing forth life. You were present some 500 years ago when your church was called to be Reformed, and you are present even here now. We can sense your spirit in this place, and so we pray that you might by the power of your spirit reshape us in this moment. Incline our ears, God, to hear your new word for us that would call us forth and make us new. For we ask in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

All right, so a brief history to begin our time this morning.

The most commonly used start date for something called the Protestant Reformation is October 31st of 1517. About what, now 7 years ago, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Maybe y'all did that here at Idlewild. I imagine you probably did. We did it back in Madison, Georgia. We marked the day as an important one. That day October 31st of 1517 was the day when Martin Luther attached his 95 Theses to the door at the church in Wittenberg, okay, and those were 95 complaints, grievances, that he had, and a group of people actually had, against the Church, against what we would come to know as the Catholic Church, okay. You can go back and you can read all 95 of those. They'll be important if you'd like to, but I'll just say there were a handful of themes that ran throughout those grievances, okay, that we live into today. And that is that we ought not have some intermediary between us and the Lord, okay. A handful of us are wearing collars this morning and stoles, but we are of no higher importance in this place. We simply have different callings in this place than many of you do, okay. There is a

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way in which each of us can have a deeply personal and a deeply significant relationship with our creator, unmitigated by someone with a collar like this. Calvinist historians, the tradition from which Presbyterians grow, often propose that the Reformation didn't necessarily start with the 95 Theses being tacked to that door, but with a priest, a theologian, Zwingley, who first preached against the abuses of the church in 1516, so just a little bit before. This was a growing, a rising tide in Europe over and against the Catholic Church. The Gutenberg printing press allowed for these new thoughts, these new ideas of theology to spread more quickly than any could have imagined that they would spread. This Reformation period lasted, depending on who you believe, anywhere from like 30 years to 130 years, right. But we, we are in the Protestant tradition—Presbyterians—and so we live in the heritage and through the history of this Reformation. And so we hold many of the things that those original reformers, many of those grievances turned from grievances into substantive change in the life of the Church, and we still uphold and live into many of those.

One of the things that we do is we also hold on to the words of the Reformers and those who came right after in that Reformation tradition. In 1674 a Dutch preacher, the last name Ludenstein, I'm not even going to attempt the first name, wrote a now famous phrase. It's one that's been translated over time—"the church reformed, always being reformed." When I was growing up, I would hear often from the pulpit, "We are reformed and always reforming." Maybe y'all are familiar with that phrase. Can I get a head nod if you're familiar with that phrase? Okay. It might be new to some of you, yeah. The Reformation, the Reformers contended, was a return to believing and preaching the Bible, but it taught a need not simply to return to that sort of teaching. It taught a need for continual Re-formation of the Christian heart. Hear that again. It taught a need for the Re-formation of the Christian heart. This wasn't simply a Church movement. It was a movement of the very heart of believers. It was the contention that God is still speaking, still working, still shaping and reshaping each and every human heart. And so it would condemn, the Reformation would, it would condemn those who claim to believe in scripture but go unchanged by it, who claim to believe it but are unchanged in heart and in soul and in practice. Throughout the Reformation even up to the present day, "the church reformed and always being reformed" has been a rallying cry, particularly for us Presbyterians. It's in our Book of Order. In this past century, the 20th century, a Princeton Theological Seminary Professor added an extra phrase. We can't really find the historical roots of this, but "the church reformed and always being reformed, according to the word of God." He felt that it was more in line with what the reformers meant, that the reform that was happening was not simply willy-nilly by the decisions made by the leadership of the church, but by the very word of the Lord. And so what we believe is that over time God is at work on us. We believe that not only from the witness of Christ, this new revelation in our midst, but actually going back as Mary said to our Hebrew text. I'm going to read Jeremiah 18: 1-6 to you.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The 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. Then the word of the LORD came to me:

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Can 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So the Biblical roots of this Reformation that took place can be found here in the Hebrew text, later also in the Greek text as well. These words of the Prophet ground our understanding of what it means to be reformed. We, collectively and individually, we are clay in the hands of a loving and thoughtful and creative potter. We are not the ones creating ourselves, giving ourselves our own shape. It is God at work. It is God's agency at work at the potter's wheel. It is God that shapes and reshapes, that decides what is pleasing in God's sight. what is good and faithful. So when we talk about "the Church reformed and always being reformed," then we have to understand that what we believe in is that God is still working to make us a more perfect and pleasing vessel. That's critically important for us. The theologian Harold Nebelsick put it well. He said, "We are the recipients of the activity of the Holy Spirit, which reforms the Church in accordance with the word of God. The Church is God's Church, a creature of God's word and spirit." And so we proclaim together, "We are reformed and always being reformed by the very spirit of God."

But over time us Presbyterians, we picked up some other mottos as well. One that I grew up hearing a lot, one that I've heard from y'all as well, is one that I'm not particularly fond of. I'm going to get to meddling right here. Presbyterians are often referred to as the Frozen Chosen. Have you ever used that phrase to describe yourself? Okay. This is about to not be funny. Here's what I want to tell you. That is unBiblical.

You are, you are not going to find that in Jeremiah. You're not going to find it in the Gospels. Frozen Chosen, I couldn't find it in the Greek or in the Hebrew, but we often repeat it. It's an unofficial moniker of our church, and I want to tell you that I think we need to stop. There are very few things I would tell you that from the pulpit, that we just need to completely stop, but that's one of them. We need to stop using using that phrase. I think it's actually damaging, because what it runs in stark contrast to is through our deeply held belief that God is still working on us. God is still reshaping us at the potter's wheel, and God is not simply reshaping us for some nebulous purpose. God is reshaping us over and over and over again so that we might be clearer reflections of Jesus, the Christ. That is the goal. We compare ourselves to our neighbors. God compares us to Christ. That means that Reformation is necessary for us. I'm not like...as much like Jesus says I want to be. Are y'all? No. Whatever the opposite of 'can I get an amen' is, right. We aren't that yet. We aren't that yet. We still need God to work on us, and we need that because we need to be changed to live in and move through our lives as they change and our world as it changes.

Pastor Courtney and I were in a meeting with a consultant this past week. He is working, he previously worked at FedEx, now he's working with the Samaritan Counseling Center. They've hired someone to come in and try to help them imagine 'who are we to be to our community now?' Are y'all aware we have a partnership with the Samaritan Counseling Center? It's a couple

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of houses back there, yeah. If you're not, come and talk to us afterwards. We'd love to let you know about it. We were sitting there talking to him, and he was talking about all the different ways that he had consulted, and he said this, and it stopped me in my tracks. He said, "Unless the internal rate of change exceeds the external rate of change, you will cease to exist." Church, let's hear it from a Church's standpoint. "Unless the internal rate of change exceeds the external rate of change, you will cease to exist." He had worked at Xerox; he had worked at Sears; he had worked at RCA. Some of y'all grew up with those being really important brands. They're not anymore, right? They found it, they found an inability within themselves, how they were constructed, to continue to change and be reformed in the world, and therefore they cease to exist. I heard a preacher say earlier this week, "The Church is calibrated for a world that no longer exists. We are doing what worked for us, but what worked for us is not working for the next generations. And because we are familiar with the way things worked for us, we think that will work again" if we try hard enough and do it with enough social media and excitement. We cannot do the same thing over and over again and think that we are keeping up with a world that is in perpetual change. Our goal, of course, is not to reflect that world that is in continual change. Our goal is to be a clearer and clearer reflection of Christ to that world that continues to change; and if it is a corporate goal for us as the Church, then it must also be personal because the Church can't change unless we individually change. Personal Reformation mirrors corporate Reformation. As Mary spoke to our children, "God is working on us." You might have heard—she didn't name it, but she began to name the fruit of the spirit of God. God is working on us to make us more patient and more kind. Love is patient and love is kind. The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. Y'all remember this, right? God is working in every way to make us clear reflections of Christ and also the fruit of the spirit. So we are called then, Church, we are called to be reformed. But what does that...what does that ask of us? I think the first thing it asks of us is an openness to the spirit of God that is still reforming. Because here's the thing, I think we Presbyterians have decided that we can opt off of the potter's wheel. I think we have decided that we can set ourselves, we can set ourselves aside, and that God is no longer working on us. But God keeps putting us back right there in the center of that spinning wheel, and God continues to work on us. What we have to do is realize we need to be open to that and malleable to the way that the spirit is working on us. Age and pedigree do not buy us a pass for being reformed. We cannot be resistant to Reformation.

I'm going to get back to that age and pedigree thing in a second, but the second thing I think the we are being called to is to allow the Word of God to form and reform us, not simply what a preacher wants to say or what some leadership of the Church want to say, but what the Word of God says about us and about our community. What does that mean? Well, the reformers thought it meant that we would have to learn more and more about scripture through our own personal practices of scripture study. Part of the Reformation was to take scripture from the elite within the Church and to bring it into the personal life of the family, okay, and to say, "This too is yours. This Word of God is for you." If the Word is going to reform you, you must be committed to being rooted in the

Word. So, if you're saying to yourself, "Uh oh, I don't feel rooted in the Word, that's all right. We've got plenty of opportunities for you to feel more and more confident in your being rooted

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in the Word of God. Raise your hand if you've done one of the Disciples Bible studies over the last couple years. Don't be afraid. Higher. People can't see you. Yeah, all right, if you don't feel rooted in the Word of God, go find one of those people who were raising their hand. Ask them how that class, what we call a Fast Track, helped them feel like they had a better understanding of God's Word. And not only that, that they were paired with other people who desired to have a better understanding of God's Word. It was in community that they learned and in community that they were reformed.

And the final thing I think that we are being called to if we are to be reformed is—paraphrasing a well-known preacher, you will never change your life until you change something that you do daily. The secret of reformation is found in daily routine. You cannot expect to come here on Sunday mornings and be here for an hour, or if the preacher goes long an hour and 20 minutes, and expect for your life to be changed. It's not going to happen. What is going to author Reformation in your life is a commitment on a daily basis to the practice of discipleship of Jesus Christ. Let's get back to that age and pedigree piece. Mary pointed out that we have a pottery studio just on the other side of Jacob and Sherri's office here. It's a wonderful gift. It's the only free pottery studio in the city. Do you all know that? It's a gift to our community. Amanda Kohr is actually one of our Directors of Generosity. She also runs the Pottery Studio. She's trying to open it more and more and more so that y'all know about it. They gather every Wednesday evening and work on pottery together. Once a year we do a pottery sale and you can buy pottery that's made there. It's pretty amazing. It's beautiful to imagine the Church sitting at the wheel and using its hands to shape something. It's beautiful to imagine you seated at the wheel and shaping something. But Amanda came to me two summers ago, and she said, “I need to drive to East Tennessee, and I need you to approve a check request for a couple of thousand.” And I said, “What are you doing and where are you running away to?” She said, “I'm going to Knoxville. I'm going to buy a Deairing Pugmill.” Y'all ever heard that word? I never heard that word before. Deairing Pugmill. It's this interesting thing. She said, “You know we use a ton of clay, but there's some clay that gets dried out, and we can't use it anymore, and we end up throwing it away.” She said, “If we go and we invest a couple of thousand dollars into this piece of equipment, this Deairing Pugmill, we will be able to take this old dried out clay that cannot be used, couldn't be placed on the wheel. it wouldn't matter how much sponge you put on it, it couldn't be used. What we can do is we can place that clay after we mix it in water, we'll say baptize it, we put it in the Deairing Pugmill, right, and it sucks out all the air that's dried out that clay, and that water gets infused back into it. When you pull it out the other side of the Deairing Pugmill, all of a sudden you have this big old lump of clay that you can shape again.” Church, I wonder what it would be like for us to imagine that we have been placed on the side in that pile of clay that isn't workable anymore. I wonder what it would be like for us to imagine that a thoughtful potter like Amanda or our Lord Jesus Christ prepares us and places us in that pugmill, and we come out the other side ready to be shaped and reshaped again.

One of the reasons why I found this sermon prep tricky is because I feel like all of our preachers this summer have done an amazing job. I've learned a whole lot from them. The other part that I

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found difficult about preaching about being reformed and always reforming is how I end this thing. But I'm getting there, okay. I think that there is tremendous hope in being reformed. I think we often attach anxiety and worry to it, but I think on balance when we understand it as the work of God, there is a tremendous amount of Hope intrinsic to it. So my hope is that we as the Church of Jesus Christ, those who God has seen fit to call to Idlewild Presbyterian Church in 2024, might imagine ourselves at the wheel being shaped and reshaped. We might even imagine that some of the things that we're doing as a church are helping us to become more malleable, maybe even Worship in a gymnasium for a summer, right. I think that there is tremendous hope for the world in a church that is willing to be reshaped so that it can reflect more clearly Jesus Christ into a rapidly changing world. And I don't think there's just hope corporately. I think there's hope for you personally, because if you're anything like me, there are places in your life that are in need of reformation. There are places in your marriage, in your family, in your parenting, in your singleness, in your work, in your faith that need to be reformed, that yearn to be reformed. The beautiful hope of the Gospel is that we worship a God who is about that work. We worship a God who sits at the spinning wheel and places clay upon it and shapes it, and when it is misshapen, this God does not get deterred. This God begins again and shapes it into something that is pleasing in God's sight.

So what I hope you take away from this is that this idea of “the Church reformed and always being reformed” is for each of us communally, and it's also for you. “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. “Come down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The 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. Then the Word of the Lord came to me again, “Can I not do with you, O house of Israel just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so you are in mine.”

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.