Looking Back and Looking Forward – Reformation Sunday

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Hebrews 11:1-12 October 29, 2023

Reformation Sunday has two sides to it. One side is looking back. The other is looking forward. The more obvious side of Reformation Sunday is the historical origin of the celebration – remembering back to Martin Luther and the birth of the Protestant church, to other reformers of the time like John Calvin and later John Knox, and remembering the roots of our church all the way back to the disciples and Jesus, or even all the way back to Abraham and Adam. We look back to honor all that was, and to measure ourselves by that standard – whether we are living up to the church Jesus intended. Whether we are honoring our ancestors and our parents in the faith. We remember those who have gone before; we remember what they believed and what they taught; and we honor them.

But the other half of Reformation Sunday is looking forward. Because truly when the Reformation started, it was about looking forward and making ourselves better. Becoming the best we can possibly be to honor God. The Reformation was about Re-forming – in God’s image. Reforming - becoming better and better, even as Christ calls us to be. The reformers said – Martin Luther, John Calvin, the ancestors of our tradition said – it is not about tradition it is about rightness with God. They might even be appalled that the celebration of their work has become more about looking back to honor them. They didn’t want the honor. They gave God the glory. And though Martin Luther and the others valued tradition. They valued rightness with God even more. They called us to look forward and Re-form. Just because we’ve always done it that way, doesn’t mean it is right. Doesn’t mean it’s wrong either. We are called to examine everything we do in the light of God’s grace and the depth of Christ’s call. If it's good – great, keep doing it. If it misses the mark, if it could be better, and of course, if it is wrong – then change.

Change sometimes feels like a dirty word. And it is certainly a difficult challenge. Some changes are great. Some changes are easy. Some changes are not. How do you know when to hold on to tradition and when to make room for the Spirit to move and transform? That is our challenge today. And not just this moment but this season in the church. We are called to re-form – in the image of God. In the church, in our own lives. What’s working and what’s not working? What is reaching people with God’s love and what is not? It is actually the same challenge the reformers tackled; the same challenge Jesus faced. When do we honor the past by continuing to do what has been meaningful? And when do we turn over the money tables in the temple or throw out the altars and rituals? It is hard to discern – but it is essential to try. We must carefully seek to do God’s will – not just keeping busy, not just keeping traditions, but keeping God’s will. Here at church and in our daily lives, how do we know the right things to do, the right path to take, the right changes to make? We listen to God.

In the reading from Hebrews for today, it is all about faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” What does the conviction of things not seen mean? It means you cannot visibly see what you should do before you do it? You can’t see the proof but you believe. You can’t see all the consequences. You can’t be certain what will happen before it happens. At some point you just have to take the leap of faith and act according to what you believe is right. According to where you believe God is calling. You do that by listening to your heart, listening to others, and listening to God. In Hebrews, the list of people who lived by faith goes on and on. From creation, people of faith have had to choose to act and move forward in the face of uncertainty. To put our trust in God, offer our best gifts and then jump in. To trust that whether it’s the right choice or the wrong action, God will catch us and move us forward. Trust that God’s “got us” and God will lead us. Taking that leap of faith is hard – plunging forward into the unknown. Trusting God.

It's hard to trust when you can’t see where the next step will lead. But as scripture says, Adam did it; and Abel and Noah and Abraham and Sarah. The list in Hebrews 11 goes on and on, naming ancestors in our faith who stepped out to follow God’s Spirit. And the point of Hebrews is all those people didn’t even have Jesus – the evidence of God’s love in Jesus Christ, word made flesh who came to save the world. They didn’t even have Jesus and still they trusted God and moved forward in faith. How can we not do the same? How can we who know Jesus, who have seen God’s love, who have experienced the resurrection, who have received grace upon grace? How can we not leap forward in faith to the life God has promised us. WE can. Of course we can, because God holds us, Jesus leads us and the Spirit empowers us. Of course, we are able to live boldly in the love of God and the miracle of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Of course we can believe, even more than all of our ancestors. We are called to serve Christ boldly in the world today, sharing God’s love, caring with the Spirit’s power. Of course, in Christ, we can. By faith.

What we may not be able to do is see three years down the road, or five years, or twenty. Or even three months. We may not be able to see how this church on this corner in Gardner will live long after all of us are gone. But we can believe the love lived here will live long into the future God has planned for us. We can believe that the love we gift today in our individual lives will continue to grow, to shine the light of Jesus, and to invite others into the presence of God. Believe it. The legacy will live on. We may not be able to see it, or to see how, but God can. God sees what is yet to come and God offers us the chance to step forward and be a part of helping others to receive that grace.

What will that look like? I have no idea. Honestly. I have some guesses. You praise God. You sing to the glory of God. You care for each other. You help those who need it. You set up programs and ministries that help to do that. You teach each other and learn from one another. You model faith for children and help them grow. You reach out into the world to show love to others, especially where it is needed. You empower people to live their faith in the world and make good choices.

What will this church look like in the future? Who knows? None of us can see the future. None of us knows how your personal faith will grow, how you will impact others for the rest of your life, or how this church will live God’s love in days and years ahead. Faith means moving ahead anyway, taking the next step, doing what you think is right. And then if you need to correct – or re-form – then you reform. God will lead. We must only trust God, listen for guidance, and keep moving forward wherever Christ leads. Easy – no! Rewarding – absolutely yes. We are blessed as we move forward in faith into the hand of God.

On this beautiful Reformation Sunday, look back at all the ways God has blessed you, all the ways God has shaped you, all the people who have formed your faith, all the ways God has called you and your people in the past. Then, by God’s grace, look forward in faith and step out into the unknown. Go where Jesus leads you. Share God’s love in a wounded world. Embrace the amazing possibilities the Spirit puts in your pathway. And as a church, may we continue to love one another and serve Jesus Christ who loves us all. May we continue to grow in ways that only God can imagine. May we continue to be all God has called and created us to be in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death, and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.” And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith, with Sarah’s involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.