

“*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

1 Samuel 3:1-21

October 29, 2017

In Louisville, Kentucky in December of the year 2000, the first ever face-to-face official meeting between representatives of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Roman Catholic Church was held. The Church of Rome was represented by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. The PC(USA) was represented by a gaggle of pastors, a couple of mission workers, a pair of seminarians, and the Rev. Dr. Anna Case-Winters, my seminary theology professor.

Anna recalls her excitement when Cardinal Edward Cassidy made an observation and asked a question: “You [Presbyterians] have a saying that seems to be at the heart of your self-understanding as a church. What do you mean when you keep referring in your documents to *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*?”¹

This rallying cry of the Reformed wing of the Protestant Reformation to which Presbyterians belong is best translated as “the church reformed, always being reformed.” That passive Latin verb is crucial. We are God’s church, and the reforming that happens is God’s work — the activity of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the Word of God. We are always being worked on by God. The Reformation was not a one-time deal. There is always room to be formed again.

Reformation comes to God’s church, and it challenges both liberal and conservative blindspots. We do not change for change’s sake, nor do we cling to tradition for tradition’s sake. We’re not to seek change or preservation at all, but to seek the Word of God and act accordingly. Part of our Reformed Tradition’s theology is that we’re bound to screw this up.

Our PC(USA) Book of Confessions contains statements of faith from the ancient church, from the Reformation era, and from the 20th Century. It contains beautiful truth. And it contains ugly errors of history. And we know that, so it really ought to not have a back cover, because we can keep adding to it. Reformed, always being reformed, according to the Word of God. We’re bound to let idols and ideologies and our messy humanity get into the cement of whatever we’re building as we seek to follow God.

King Solomon built the temple in seven years. It took him thirteen to build his palace — which is just one of the problems in this story. The task has fallen to Solomon either because God told David that a permanent address wasn’t necessary (2 Samuel 7) and so David’s son would build something cool after he died, or because God wouldn’t let David build a temple because he had too much blood on his hands (2 Chronicles 22).

Either way, the temple gets off to a good start. King Solomon talks to the foreign king, Hiram, about the temple project, hoping to secure those lovely cedars of Lebanon as building material. Solomon is clear that this project is about the God of Israel. It is “for the name of the LORD my God.” God is at the center of this renewal movement. Worship is important. Having a place to worship is important. Having a gathering place, a focal point for the community, is important. This is a people who are no longer wandering, but who are now secure in

¹ “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Our misused motto” by Anna Case-Winters, at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ecclesia-reformata/>

their dwelling and who will make a glorious place dedicated to God.

And then things go off the rails in the part of the story that our reading leapt over. Solomon creates an immense workforce — out of slave labor from among his people. The Hebrew term for the workforce is only used to describe Israelite workers in one other place in the Bible: in the book of Exodus where the people are under the cruel whip of Pharaoh and his taskmasters.² The reformation moment for Israel becomes an oppressive moment, built by overtaxation and forced labor. In the next generation, this oppression leads to calls for reform that would eventually tear the kingdom of Israel in two.

I have not visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome but the word on the street is that it is a glorious testament to the power and presence of God. Of course, this 16th Century masterpiece came with an oppressive price of its own. The project was incredibly costly, and one method of financing the construction was the granting of indulgences in return for money. The church was giving afterlife benefits in exchange for capital campaign contributions. (I promise that despite missing an offering when we had to cancel worship a few weeks ago, indulgences have not yet been discussed by our session.)

The aggressive indulgence sales pitch in Germany eventually led a priest by the name of Martin Luther to write his *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* — which contained ninety-five theses about how the church had gone astray — and which he mailed to the archbishop and posted on the door of the church at Wittenberg. Thus was born the Protestant Reformation, decades of conflict and bloodshed that splintered the church. And the Reformation had its own failings: anti-semitism and violence and new corruptions to replace the old ones.

We try to do something great to honor God, to put God at the center, to re-form the way we encounter the holy. And inevitably we end up creating something that splits the kingdom. And we have to re-form again. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. After the temple, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos come to remind the people that God doesn't live in the temple. God isn't confined to worship on the sabbath. God is to be worshiped every day, in every act. God is to be sought through prayer and scripture, but also in service and care for the vulnerable.

Later still, Jesus would enter the temple courtyard and turn over the tables. His reformation meant understanding that God had come to earth to heal and to feed and to liberate and to bless. And this came with an oppressive price, for the way of Christ is the way of the cross, bearing the weight of so much brokenness.

And here we are. Five hundred years since Luther and Calvin and all the other reformers. Nearly a thousand years from when the church split into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Fifteen-hundred years since Christianity became the dominant force in the West. Two thousand years since they found the empty tomb and word spread and a new movement within Judaism began. In 2017, the mainline Protestant churches are described as being in severe decline for decades. Is the church dying? Or is it being re-formed once again?

We are part of glorious institutions — from the Church Universal, to the Reformed tradition, to our particular Presbyterian Church (USA), to our little family here at EPC. These each bring glory to God and proclaim good news to humanity and all of creation and perform miracles of grace and compassion and hope in a fearful world. And they are all in need of being reformed according to the Word of God. These institutions have brokenness

² Commentary by Brent Shawn at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3314

mixed into the cement, to varying degrees depending on the sin. In this congregation, we seek to name those — racism, sexism, violence, fear of anyone different from us, a myth of scarcity, an ignorance of history, mistrust of science, the privilege of disengagement, and so many others. And then, when we're on our game, we seek to follow the Word of God in asking to be re-formed again.

The temple has been completed, and all the stops are pulled out for the ceremony to move all the holy stuff from the tabernacle to the new temple. The ark of the covenant is placed in the holy of holies, there are sacrifices galore, and the temple is filled with the glory of the LORD of Israel. The move is a success. So much so that the priests have to stop what they're doing, interrupted by the cloud of the presence of God, a divine interruption to their work. God is responding, despite the brokenness built into the temple's construction. God shows up, even though this whole thing will need re-forming. Rather, God shows up, *because* this whole thing will need re-forming.

Solomon is oblivious to the cracks in the edifice. He declares, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." And without a hint of irony he adds, "I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." Indeed, God will inhabit the temple. But God will not be contained by it — neither by its beauty nor its faults.

The God we know in Jesus Christ cannot be confined to a holy of holies, a temple, a church sanctuary, or any other building or institution that we create. This is a God who cannot be contained by a pharaoh's army, or a Caesar's violent peace, or death on a cross.

This God has too much work to do. Work to do to re-form the world. Work to do to reform the church. Work to do to re-form each of us. Any time we think that God is done with us — either because we think we've reached perfection or because we think God won't bother with such faulty materials, we place a limit on God that Christ pushes aside, again and again. Christ embodies the glory of God in humility and grace, feeding us and healing us and leading us to see the brokenhearted in order to show us a new vision of our place in God's kingdom.

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.