

## Reformation Sunday – Sometimes We Need Reshaping

Jeremiah 18:1-11

<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” <sup>3</sup>So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. <sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. <sup>9</sup>And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. <sup>11</sup>Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.



A long time ago, when phone calls were made only on land lines from home or work or phone booths, my father was driving down a long stretch of road and suddenly the car stopped. He pulled to the side of the road and attempted in vain to restart the car. That’s when he looked and realized that the gauge on the dashboard indicated “E” – empty. He was out of gas. He told me that story and expressed his frustration at having to walk for a gas can and some gas.

Hearing that story I thought “I never want that to happen to me”.

A friend told me the story about buying a used car. During the period of getting to know the car he wanted to see where on the gas gauge the “low fuel” warning light would come on. So he drove and drove and drove until he was on a long stretch of road and his car stopped. Turns out his car had no “low fuel” warning function.

Every car I’ve had I’ve been pleased to discover that before I got to “E” a warning light appeared.

To this day, I’ve never run out of gas.

With Jeremiah, God is telling us a story. We can picture Jeremiah arriving at the potter’s house. We can picture the potter spinning a two stone pottery wheel: one stone above on which the clay sat and connected with a rod one stone below that the potter spun with his feet.

Picture Jeremiah wondering why God has sent him there. He watches as the potter gathers the clay, sets it on the wheel, begins shaping it, some grumbling by the potter, somehow the pot is

not developing as the potter had intended, and then in a moment, the potter stops turning the wheel and with two hands he reforms the clay into its original lump and begins reshaping it.

It was at that point that Jeremiah likely remembered in his early days that the Philistine army had defeated the Israelite soldiers and destroyed Shiloh, their Washington DC. They burned the village and destroyed the sanctuary that was not just a local synagogue, but the place where the ark of the covenant was kept. Jeremiah remembered the military defeat and how the Philistines took as a trophy of war the sacred ark in which Israel believed that God dwelt.

And that's when he realized why God had sent him to the potter's house. Jeremiah said

<sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

We read this Scripture today, not because of some imminent threat from a modern Egypt, Assyria or Babylon, but because it reminds us that God uses various means to reshape his people.

One historian wrote, “[Jeremiah] called for a reformation – not just a superficial reform of traditional rites and practices, but a reformation that begins in the heart, the seat of human loyalties and affections. He called for a “circumcision of the heart,” for a breaking up of the fallow grown that had encrusted the life of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

Reform of the heart and the affections have been a regular part of the people of God for we are Adams and Eves – seeking to set the terms for abundant life, we are at times Jonahs rebellious – running from God's call, and we are Marthas who are distracted by the concerns of this life.

And the principle of interpretation today is that we don't have to run out of gas to learn how undesirable it is to get to “E”.

Over centuries the church had wandered from God's ways, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and others were the Jeremiah's of their day calling for the reform of the church. One of their mottos was “reformata et semper reformanda” which means “the church reformed and always reforming”. That phrase first appeared in a 1674 devotional by Jodocus van Lodenstein, who was involved in the Dutch Second Reformation. According to van Lodenstein and other reformers who used the phrase, the church was reformed under the Protestant Reformation, but it was always in need of further reformation, that is according to the Word of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, Prentice Hall, Toronto, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1975, p. 348

Today we not only remember the historical event of the reformation; we acknowledge the spiritual need for reform.

Recently I preached at the installation of a young pastor. Thinking of his first call, I was remembering my first call to the Mountain Top Larger Parish in Clearfield County, PA. The three churches of the Larger Parish had sent a team to my seminary where I was one of the students they interviewed. I felt a connection with them and thought “this may be the one God has in store for me.” Within a month I drove to Clearfield where I met with the whole committee. During that interview, one of the search committee members said of the three churches “we are a well-oiled machine and ready to work”. And he was right. Their previous pastor had served them for 18 years and the Parish was healthy, organized and mobilized.

Like Elder Lee Gill, I thought about Oakmont Presbyterian Church and thought we are a well-oiled machine: strong staff, opportunities for men and women, children and youth, young adults, for service inside the church and mission outside the church. In many ways, we are a well-oiled machine.

As I thought about that comment, I realized that a strong church exists not for itself. We are an instrument of God’s work. That led to some searching, reformation-type questions.

Do our programs serve God’s intentions for us?

Remember Paul’s explanation of his pre-Protestant work ethic: “<sup>28</sup>It is he [Christ Jesus] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.”<sup>2</sup>

Do we open ourselves not just to the Spirit’s help in OUR life, are we open to the Spirit using us for God’s work in OTHER’S lives?

Remember what Jesus said, “As the Father sent me so I send you.”<sup>3</sup>

We are called by God for a two-fold purpose: for growing (into Christ) and going to do Christ’s work in the world.

In addition to the help that our faith provides us, we remember on this Reformation Sunday that God seeks for us both maturity in Christ (a continual growth in our character) and service (the use of our time, talents and treasures as Christ’s agents in the world).

---

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 1:28-29

<sup>3</sup> John 20:21

In light of God's reshaping of Israel, where is it that we need reshaping?

I would like to lift up one area today.

Several years ago, I mentioned that I had an exit interview with a visitor. This woman had worshipped with us for six weeks and she said "not one person greeted her".

I shared this with Session and one of the elders said that during her early visits to the church very few people greeted her and while inside the sanctuary she felt like an outsider.

In the last month, I was in conversation with a number of church members when one of them said, "That was my experience. I came for four Sundays and no one greeted me. So I joined another church. Eventually my draw to Presbyterians was such that I came back."

Someone recently reminded me: we never get a second chance to make a first impression. We can have excellent programs for growing in faith. Our worship can be exemplary. But if visitors do not feel welcome here, our efforts will be undercut by our lack of welcome to those who come here.

A leader in another congregation described their attitude toward visitors: "We look at every first-time visitor as someone who may be genuinely unchurched, for whom this may be their first time in years that he or she has visited a church. It may have taken a great deal of courage, or a great need that prompted him or her to come. Often visitors come only after a friend has invited them five or six times, or after having received one of our mailings seven times. If this is the case, we want to do everything in our power to help the visitor feel the welcome of Christ through the church and to motivate him or her to return the following week."<sup>4</sup>

In reading that I had to reform my understanding of church visitors. they're not all just trying to find a church like they might want to find a mechanic. A pressing need may have caused them to come. And so my reformation is in re-thinking visitors. I'm not willing to think of our church as a Best Buy where customers are free to browse and if I can help them I will. In that image, I may be friendly and helpful, but it is at the initiative of the consumer.

I have a new, reformed image of visitors – I picture that Jesus has been quietly working in their minds and hearts. And that it has been the Spirit that has been nudging them to come. Perhaps for some nagging issue on which they need help. Perhaps it is the loss of hope. Perhaps it is just a general sense of life is out of whack and they need to have some personal reformation. I now see them waking up on a Sunday morning and Jesus is standing quietly, perhaps imperceptibly with them, silently encouraging them to come. When they drive to the church Jesus is riding with

---

<sup>4</sup> Debi Williams Nixon with Adam Hamilton, Catch: Attracting and Connecting Visitors, Abington Press, Nashville, 2009, p. 38

them and watching for a parking space. They get out of their car and Jesus leads them to our door and hands them over to us.

Then, when they come in, we welcome them as would please Jesus: “Good morning, I’m so glad that you’re here. My name is Steve.”

How do you welcome people who are around you?

Two caveats...

If you absolutely HATE WELCOMING PEOPLE, please don’t welcome people. If hospitality is not your gift, I trust that God will raise up others who can offer a warm welcome.

Some of you have had the experience of welcoming someone who responds “I’ve been a member for 50 years!” Fear not. you can say, “I’m glad to meet you.”

I could say more, but I think you get the point. After worship, please greet someone whom you do not know. (I’ll be watching. ☺) In the coming month, let’s practice our welcoming others so that we may feel comfortable greeting and develop a good habit of welcoming people. Remember, Jesus has led them over time to this place that we might give tangible expression to his love for them. Let’s not let Jesus down...

Amen? Amen.

Rev. Dr. Steve Wilson  
Oakmont Presbyterian Church  
415 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Oakmont, PA 15139  
412/828-5770  
swilson@oakmontpresby.org