

Always Reforming

Sermon for October 30, 2016

By Lisa Watts

Just about a year ago, our church was privileged to host a day with David LaMotte. David is a well-known musician and social activist who led an afternoon workshop for our youth based on his book “Worldchanging 101: Challenging the Myth of Powerlessness.” He also performed a concert that evening. It did not take long for our youth to sense David’s passion for making positive changes in our world, and to take his message and run with it. One of my favorite David quotes is “You are changing the world whether you like it or not. What changes will you make?” He has committed himself to doing whatever he can to right the wrongs he sees: he deals head on with the issues of racism, inequality, global awareness, and other issues of social justice. David takes to heart the message we heard in this morning’s reading from Psalm 119: “You are righteous, Lord, and your laws are just. The rules you have given are completely fair and right. My anger burns in me like a fire because my enemies disregard your commands.” David works daily to challenge the injustice he sees and bring about change. Reform.

Today is Reformation Sunday. This is the day we remember the contributions of those who challenged the Catholic Church, most notably Martin Luther, who, in 1517 nailed his 95 theses to the door of a cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. While this may sound like a strange thing to do, it was actually a common practice in that day and was seen as an invitation for people to debate. Luther challenged portions of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church as well as specific practices, hoping to change or reform the church. The movement quickly gained support from the German states, Scandinavia, Scotland and parts of France. The movement did not prove to be successful, and as the hope of reforming the Roman Catholic Church faded, these protesters or “protestants” were forced to separate, resulting in the diverse elements that evolved into the Protestant denominations

known to us today. My Latin is a bit rusty, but the motto, if you will, of the Reformation was “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda” which translates to a phrase we Presbyterians know very well: “The church reformed and always reforming.” As with other periods of change, our church history has helped to inform and inspire us: challenging us to listen and discover what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do in a new time or a time of discord.

So are we in a new time or a time of discord? You only have to watch the news or read a paper to hear stories of violence, intolerance, injustice, and political polarization. Church membership is shrinking, churches are permanently closing their doors, and even churches who are still thriving report that attendance is sporadic and pledging is down. According to a Pew Research Center study done earlier this year, the number of Americans who do not identify with a religious group is growing. While nationwide surveys done in the 70s found that fewer than 1 in 10 Americans did not identify themselves as “religious,” this recent study found that 23% of adults now identify themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular.” And if you look at Millennials, that number skyrockets to almost 80% that identify themselves as “religiously unaffiliated.” There are many factors cited as to why this is occurring...many of these people were not brought up in a church environment, it is more socially acceptable today than it was 40 years ago to acknowledge a lack of church affiliation, as well as the reality of more and more aspects of our lives reaching into our previously unencumbered Sundays. It comes down to being a matter of prioritizing all that must be accomplished within the limited amount of time available.

At first reading, this sounds grim, but I don't see it as necessarily a bad thing. It is our current reality and perhaps a call for us to reexamine or reform how and why we “do” church. So, what *are* we supposed to do about this new reality? Maybe before we look at what to do, we should take a look at why we should do something.

In this era of social media, I look at Facebook as a necessary evil sometimes. Like many others, I love to use it to see what folks I know are up to, see pictures of their kids and grandkids, and keep in touch with people I have not seen in person for

many years. What I do not love about Facebook is the anonymity that tends to encourage people to bring out their worst selves. If you can hide behind a username, you can say pretty much anything you want without repercussion. The vitriol, nasty comments and out and out hatred are enough to make me want to pull the plug permanently sometimes. Even people I know and love, who share similar views on the world, sometimes make comments that make me cringe. We seem to have become a society that has forgotten how to disagree respectfully. We have become an “I’m right and you’re wrong” people, intolerant of views that we do not share and ideas we find different.

Earlier I mentioned the challenges the church in general has been facing...while we still have a vital and active congregation here at RRPC, we are not immune. We have seen a recent decline in attendance at both worship and church school on Sundays. The new reality here is that Sundays are no longer days left for the church. Other activities such as kids’ sports, work, and even school have begun to fill Sundays with other obligations. Just this past spring, one of our most faithful and active high school seniors was forced to choose between participating in our Youth Sunday service and taking a test that a teacher had scheduled for a Sunday morning. Even just a few years back, this was a choice that simply would not have existed.

So, is this really a problem? Do we really need to be at church? Does it really matter? I mentioned my love/dislike (that’s about as far as my emoji speak goes) relationship with Facebook. One aspect that I do like--I have found some really great private groups that center on Christian Education. It is an easy way for those of us involved in faith formation to share ideas, ask questions and find support. One of the groups I belong to is called Hope 4 CE and I check it out almost every day for inspiration. Folks often post articles relevant to Christian Education. Recently the topic of declining church attendance and its’ effect on adults and children’s faith formation came up. Folks started posting a slew of articles from publications such as Presbyterian Outlook, APCE’s publication, the Advocate, and many others. The research from these articles shows overwhelmingly that, for children to value church and Christian community, they must see their parents value it. The research also shows that people of any age are more likely to stay involved with a church that provides them with a spiritual community experience,

a sense of belonging to God and belonging together. Last year was a confirmation year for us. We had 19 young people who spent the year with me every other Sunday morning, exploring issues of faith and belief and what exactly it means to be Presbyterian. An essential component of our program is the mentoring program. Each young person is paired with an adult in the congregation. They meet regularly throughout the year to discuss just about anything. The desired outcome is that each young person will now have an adult in the congregation, other than their parents, who has a relationship with them. This helps build that essential feeling of community and belonging to a family of faith. I know from personal experience that our two sons, Bryan and Eric, now 32 and 28, had wonderful mentors who kept relationships with them even as they went off to college.

So why is that sense of a church community so important? Corporate worship is essential to our well-being as Christians. We are called to do many things, but first and foremost, we are called to worship our Creator. Yes, we are called to be in solitary prayer and relationship with God, but remember Matthew 18:20 “wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in my Name, I am there among them.” Community. A chance to join our hearts, minds and spirits in gratitude and praise to God. Listen to some of the words from the morning’s reading from Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians: “Our brothers and sisters, we must thank God at all times for you. It is right for us to do so, because your faith is growing so much and the love each of you has for the others is becoming greater.” Not long ago, I overheard a conversation between two people. The first one, discussing a recent worship service they had both attended said, “You know, I just did not get anything out of that service. It did nothing for me.” The other person replied, “I’m sorry to hear that...but exactly what did you BRING to worship?” Too often we come with the expectation that we are to be entertained or amused by worship, or that we are simply fulfilling an obligation by attending. We can forget that primary call to be in community with others, worshipping God. And the next step is to take that sense of community beyond the walls of the church building, into the world that is so often a scary and unkind place.

This past summer, we were very fortunate to have ten high school kids from our church take part in the Presbyterian Youth Triennium event at Purdue University.

They spent a week with almost 5000 youth from around the country and even other countries. A couple of weeks ago you had a chance to hear from Marlee McGorray about her experience. Next week you will have the opportunity to hear more from some of the other participants. One of the things I heard overall from most of the kids was that it gave them a week to be free-free from judgment based on their age, free to interact and worship with people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, free to worship God in new and different ways. I look at the harsh reality of our society today and think how difficult it must be to process it at the age of 15 or 16...or the age of 8 or 9...and even for us as adults. Being a part of a strong community of faith like we have here gives us the tools at any age to deal with the realities of life in a difficult world. It helps us to understand why, when faced with someone who thinks differently than we do, instead of a knee-jerk response of “You are so wrong-how can you say that?” we might be more inclined to say “I don’t agree with you, but I would like to hear what you have to say.” It helps us to go out and make a positive impact on the community around us, through mission activities like our service to North Church, our annual youth mission trips, our community vacation Bible school , and our Food Sunday program. Being part of a strong faith community grounds us in the teachings of Jesus to love each and every person God has created, to work for issues of social justice, and to speak for those who are unable to speak for themselves. Remember a few years back, that saying that we found on bracelets, bookmarks and pens...WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? These are the things that Jesus would do. These are the things we are expected to do as Jesus’ hands and feet here.

So, is this message designed to inspire guilty participation on Sunday mornings? Nope. I’m a mom and our sons will tell you that I did have a pretty good grasp of the whole guilt thing when they were growing up, but my challenge for you today is to get you thinking. Thinking about your place in this community of faith. Thinking about how this church can remain vital and active. Thinking about how we can strengthen our worship community and reach beyond our walls to have a positive effect on the world around us. Thinking about what gifts and strengths each of you brings to our community here.

The church reformed and always reforming. The world around us is changing so we, as a church, must figure out exactly what that means for us. The final two

verses of our reading from Second Thessalonians this morning are an appropriate end to our message: We always pray for you. We ask our God to make you worthy of the life God has called you to live. May God fulfill by his power all your desire for goodness and complete our work of faith. In this way the name of our Lord Jesus will receive glory from you and you from him, by the grace of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.