

Sermon: Uncertain Re-Formation

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Scriptures: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139

As we begin our time together today, we cannot forget the importance of the date: September 11, 2022. 21 years ago, the country and, indeed, the world went through a moment of profound loss as a result of the horrific acts of a few. As always, we have put up our banner honoring those who lost their lives, those who gave of themselves in the days, weeks, months, and years after. Moments like these are inflection points. They change the way we look at the world, the way we see life, and they cause us to reflect on our faith. This week, we face different kind of inflection point, one that perhaps we in America are less impacted by, but one that cannot escape our notice, in the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. When our sense of the world changes as it did on September 11, 2001 and as it does to a different degree with the exit of Britain's Queen after 7 decades on the world stage, we cannot help but think about what other changes are coming our way.

Recently, I've been spending more time with the historical roots of our tradition. Most Christians see their roots as extending to the time of Abraham or even, in some cases, to a literal Adam and Eve. But, as we think about inflection points, the history we are perhaps most interested in is the history of changes in how we do church. One of the most significant times of change in our history is the period of the reformations. Yes, I said reformations, plural. I say that because, as it happens, there were reformations happening in multiple countries throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. What we think of as "The" Reformation with the then Roman Catholic priest Martin Luther posting his Ninety-five theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, was merely one of many reconsiderations of theology, Christian belief, and doctrine occurring in 16th Century Europe. In fact, there were even what we might think of as pre-Reformation movements prior to Luther who he proceeded to connect his theses with—it was vital that his ideas were not seen as outliers, but as building off ideas that were already in existence. Luther didn't want to do away with Roman Catholicism, he wasn't trying to reinvent Christianity, what he wanted to do was get the Catholic church to

rethink some of its practices for which he saw no scriptural basis—one of those practices was the selling of indulgences, which was basically a way for those with enough money to buy their way to quicker forgiveness and therefore less time spent after death paying for sins in purgatory. Luther believed that ultimate forgiveness was God's alone, an idea I think many of us would agree with.

But whether he wanted a re-invention or not, Luther and other revolutionary 16th century theologians, such as Switzerland's Ulrich Zwingli, England's Thomas Cranmer, and France's John Calvin, brought it about in many forms over centuries. Our own history in the UCC can be tied not just to Lutheranism, itself, but to the Swiss-German Reformed tradition, Anglicanism, Congregationalism, Anabaptism and other systems that branched out until we became united under the banner United Church of Christ in 1957. We remain in full communion with many other denominations across the world, all from a Christian belief that has been shaped and re-shaped over centuries of history.

My point today isn't to give you a history lesson, in which in-house historian Belva LaMotte and I may be the only ones interested. My point is that the church, just like all of us individually, is constantly undergoing re-invention. I've spoken before about my own sense of call to the ministry, and noted that my beliefs have shifted and adjusted as my walk with God has formed and reformed me. As I made my way out of fundamentalist thought, it was important for me to find a church that would let me explore not just what I believed, but who I was at my core. In the United Church of Christ, I found that. It's made me who I am today—which you may consider a good or a bad thing depending on what you think of me, I suppose.

A church that isn't willing to undergo some re-formation is probably not a church that is thriving and/or growing in a time when fewer people are interested in organized religion than ever before. We who call ourselves Christian church goers have decisions to make about how we will live into God's call in our future. The responsibility to keep the church "alive" feels like a very heavy one, indeed. And it is in this that today's scriptures can be helpful to our vision. Today, we are primarily focused on two texts: one from Jeremiah 18 and the other Psalm 139, which was the basis of our call to worship (and just so

happens to be my favorite of them all). Each speaks to a God who doesn't just create, but who has an interest in the ongoing process of re-creation.

The Psalmist sings of a God who has, like the potter referenced in Jeremiah, formed us. God was there, shaping us at our beginning and stays with us. God is present in our waking up and our lying down, in all our successes and failures, whoever and wherever we are, whatever we think, and (perhaps most importantly) whatever we do. Psalm 139 speaks of a God who isn't just there in a passive sense, but one who is active, alive, and working in our lives from our earliest beginnings, throughout our living, and through to our earthly end. As I thought about the presence of God this week, I couldn't help but think about other steadying forces in our lives. My thoughts naturally turned to my grandfather and then to Queen Elizabeth II who, though not America's queen, has been a constant presence on the world stage for nearly every person alive today. But unlike the steadying presence of those we have with us during our earthly lives, the presence of God is eternal. God, Creator of all that is and was and ever shall be, remains a constant whether we choose to acknowledge God's abiding presence or not. That's good news. In the shifting sands of the earth around us, the dynamic Spirit of the living God has been and will continue to be alive and working all around us, seeing us through good times and bad. Psalm 139 speaks to this enduring presence and, at least for me, is the Psalm I turn to when the life's seas become too choppy and the boat around me threatens to topple over.

Psalm 139 also speaks to God's creative Spirit in forming our inward parts, knitting us together in our mother's womb. And that formation continues through our birth and throughout our lives. It is not a once and done situation, but rather an ongoing process. As we turn to Jeremiah, God's formative nature becomes clearer. Jeremiah 18:3 reads, "So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working as his wheel." If God is the potter in this metaphor, here we are given an image of a God who is at work in his creative process—but he doesn't just form the clay and leave it to dry or fire it in the kiln. Because, as verse 4 begins: "The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand," and rather than abandon that spoiled project, what does the potter do? Verse 4 continues, "and he worked it into another vessel as seemed good to him." The

potter does not throw away the work of art because it is ruined, he cares that it is formed into something good. Not mediocre. Not unexceptional. Not merely functional. Good.

When we think of “good” creations, we might think back to the first creation story in Genesis, which gives us an image of a benevolent, all-powerful creator who looks at what God has created and calls each thing what? Good. This is not a God who is indifferent to creation, but one who wants what is best for the good creation he had brought into being. And that’s what we see in verses 5-11. “Can I not do with you... just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.” He says this to a people, the house of Israel, who are *constantly* screwing up. Just when God thinks they’ve turned a new corner, they mess up again. God has created a good creation, but not a perfect one and not one without agency, but one who can make decisions for themselves. As finite and fallible beings, humans will sometimes make the wrong choices—sometimes they will even make evil choices, catastrophic ones. And, at the same time, when they humble themselves and turn their eyes back to God, when they allow God to light their path and lead them on their way, they find that God will lead them back to what is good and right and just.

In other words, God doesn’t leave them in their wicked actions and abandon them to oblivion. Instead, this is a God who is purposeful and active in the lives of all that God has created. This is a God who had accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness. This is one who, despite their repeated disobedience and failures to live the lives to which God called them, does not abandon them, but instead sticks around and is ready to help in the process of re-formation even in circumstances where the outcome will be uncertain.

Uncertainty surrounds us all the time in life, and it is ever-present in the life of the church. Right now, we and other churches throughout the Western world are facing an inflection point of our own. We are at that spot on a curve where a change in direction is inevitable. This pivotal moment is one which will determine what parts of our faith will remain in the decades and centuries to come and we all, individually and as

congregations, must participate in the re-creation of what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Throughout history, from the beginnings of Israel, through the age of Jesus, of Paul and the early church, into the times of reformation, and all the way into today, we have faced these inflection points. What matters to the world? What is church to those who are not a part of it? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What is the purpose of faith in the world? What do we need to keep? What do we need to throw out to make space to bring more people into the life of the church?

At each inflection point throughout history, these questions have been asked and they demand careful thought. But it cannot end with thought. It cannot be mere speculation. It cannot be us looking at the clay and thinking, it's ruined, so I'll just give up. Inflection points call us to thought as well as to action. We, the church, are like the clay in the potter's hand. What we've always done isn't working. But where we are now isn't where we must stay. Just as the House of Israel heard from the Lord God through the prophet Jeremiah, this inflection point doesn't have to turn us toward an end. We have choices. We are capable. We have God on our side. We just need to be willing. We must allow the Divine Potter to rework us, to re-form us, so that our existence resonates beyond this moment. We are a church whose vision is to be a vibrant and diverse community of believers whose faith inspires hope and changes lives. We have to participate with the Divine Potter so that what we do in the world makes a difference in the lives of other human beings around us who are also made in the image of God. So, as we begin together to think about what it means to be the church, let us boldly venture into this uncertain re-formation, guided by the Spirit of the living God who is active and waiting for us to join in the re-working and re-newal of our faith. Amen.