

Reformed and Ever Reforming
Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church
October 29, 2023
Phyllis Tickle's 500 Year Church Rummage Sale Excerpt

I heard from Pastor Terino about last weekend's Jemez Valley Trail Sale and just how involved the church was in this valley wide event. As recognition of the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church's role in the well-being of the larger community, your congregation was the recipient of all if it's proceeds proceeds. Well done good and faithful servants, a job well done, and thanks to all volunteered and made donations of items to support this important event.

That the Jemez Valley rummage sale happened just a week before Reformation Sunday in the life of the church is actually quite timely. It brought to mind a popular book, written by Church Historian Dr. Phyllis Tickle in entitled *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. She concludes, from her study of church history, that about every 500 years the church is compelled to have a giant rummage sale in which it trots out things that have accumulated—things like doctrines, traditions, and practices—and sorts through them to see what should be kept and what should be discarded. The goal is to simplify and keep what is most faithful and useful.

She proposes that the the first Church Rummage sale happened in 451 AD, nearly 500 years after the birth of Christianity. It happened at what was called the Council of Chalcedon. This was a gathering during the waning days of the Roman empire to clarify what constituted true Christian doctrine, as many heretical movements had sprung up in the early church. The intent was to clarify what the church believed about God's purpose thar was revealed in the life of Jesus Christ.

About 500 years after that, in 1054, the Second Church Rummage Sale happened, when there was a Great Schism that took place between Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church over issues like the source of the Holy Spirit, does the Spirit proceed only from the Father, or from both the Father and the Son? And on a more practical issue there was a debate over whether leavened or unleavened bread should be served during communion. These questions might seem a little esoteric today, but these were important questions in early Christendom that needed to be settled.

The Third Church Rummage sale, the one most familiar to most of us, was the Protestant Reformation which began on October 31, 1517, when a German Catholic monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the cathedral church in Wittenberg, Germany. In that day, it was the practice to nail a document on the cathedral door to invite a conversation with the church hierarchy about questions of faith. Luther believed that many of the practices of the Roman church needed to be left behind for him one of the biggest was the practice of selling indulgences. This was a “tradition” which allowed someone to seek repentance for themselves or another by purchasing an indulgence, which secured the holiness of the saints for the forgiveness of sins or even the release of a loved one from purgatory. The excess holiness of Jesus, Mary, and other saints was thought to be saved in a “Treasury of the Church” and shares of that spiritual treasure could be acquired with a cash indulgence payment.

Luther and many others believed this practice was completely contrary to scripture. Luther challenged the church leadership to end such unbiblical practices and get back to basic necessities of the faith. He believed the church should be guided by three basic doctrines—what we now know as the three “solas, which means “alone in Latin” —**sola Scriptura** (Scripture alone), **sola Gratia** (Grace alone), **sola**

Fide (Faith alone). These are the foundations of Protestant Christianity and the Presbyterian Church—that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone as taught by Scripture.

The church hierarchy dismissed Luther’s critique and he was excommunicated. He and others then began what came to be known as the Lutheran Church.

It is the anniversary of this Third Church-wide rummage sale, the Reformation, that we celebrate in the Presbyterian church calendar today. Interestingly, we are now a tad more than 500 years since the last Church-wide Rummage sale and if the pattern holds, we might be ready soon for another church upheaval and renewal.

After the Lutherans split from the Roman Catholic Church, more Protestant churches emerged, as a second generation of reformers arose in France and Switzerland, including John Calvin who led a faith community in Geneva. Calvin was a man of deep convictions, intelligence, and ardor, an archaic word that means passion or conviction. He was also a lawyer and believed it important to have agreed upon principles that created an orderly way for the church to govern itself. In the Presbyterian church, to this day, we still speak of “doing things decently and in order.” As well, this Reformed Church had a shared leadership between clergy and ruling lay elders, called presbyters.

A disciple of Calvin’s Church, a Scotsman named John Knox, carried this faith back to his homeland. The practices and theology of what came to be known as the Reformed branch of the church led to the beginning of the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland later sent missionaries to the New World and the first Presbyterian congregation was chartered in Jamaica, New York in 1672. It is from this stream of church history that the Presbyterian Church (USA), to which we belong, came to be. One of the great convictions of the Presbyterian heritage is that the

“Church is Reformed and ever Reforming.” We should never be satisfied that we have become what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world today, as if we have it all figured out. We are always being called upon by God to be faithful to the eternal truths of Christ's reign and live those out in the world in which we live. In essence, change is inherent in the Reformed tradition ...as well as the kind of ardor and tenacity that make the descendants of Calvin a force to be reckoned with. I once read a humorous story about a British general who said, “I would rather go to battle against a crack enemy regiment of soldiers, than one zealous Calvinist armed with a cause.”

I have great respect our history and a strong commitment to serving the Presbyterian Church USA...not because it is better than any other church...for we as congregations and as a denomination certainly fall short of the glory of God. But we Presbyterians play a meaningful role in the work of Christ in the world. I believe the world would be diminished if the Presbyterian Church somehow ceased to exist.

Please allow me to share some reasons for why the Presbyterian Church is important to me and to the larger world...I hope it aligns with some of your reasons for being a part of this congregation. They relate to some of the distinct theological beliefs and practices of the Reformed faith.

First Presbyterians are grounded in an affirmation of “God’s sovereignty” over all creation...over all the marvels of the universe, over all living creatures, over all of time and history, over all of its principalities and powers. God is always at work, in big ways or small ways, in forces seen and unseen, and in people, from the humble to the powerful. This conviction is well expressed in a Presbyterian Church USA’s 1991 document entitled *A Declaration of Faith*. It reads, “We do not fully comprehend

who God is or how God's works. God's reality far exceeds all our words to say. God comes to us on God's terms and is able to do far more than we ask or think."

This faith in God's sovereignty also found expression in the faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Reformed German pastor and resister to Nazi atrocities in World War II. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Gestapo and knew his execution was imminent. In this darkest time in his life wrote, "I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose God needs people who make the best use of everything." Similarly, I see Dr. Martin Luther King's belief "that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" is also a statement of God's sovereignty...a trust that something greater is at work in this world, even when we cannot perceive it, we still strive for it.

Also, the Reformed faith tradition emphasizes the "Lordship of Christ." That we see in the life and teaching of Jesus the very embodiment of God's intention for human beings and we trust that in every moment the reign of God Christ came to inaugurate is still unfolding...a reign of compassion, justice, and peace, that we are each invited to be disciples in that reign. Another passage from the PCUSA's Declaration of Faith articulates Christ's life and calling this way, "Jesus was what we are and Jesus was what we should be. He served God with complete trust and unwavering obedience. He loved all kinds of people and accepted their love. Jesus allowed no temptations or threats to keep him from loving God with his whole being and his neighbor as himself. We recognize in Jesus what God created us to be. We declare that Jesus is Lord. His resurrection is a decisive victory over the powers that deform and destroy life, We maintain that ultimate sovereignty now belongs to Jesus Christ in every sphere of life. Jesus had been Lord from the beginning, He will be Lord at the end. Even now he is Lord!"

On this Reformation Sunday, may we all feel God's call to be a part of Jesus' unfolding reign on earth. May we celebrate those aspects in our Presbyterian tradition which are faithful, and also be honest about our places of brokenness and the need for humility and change. May we open to the next Church-wide Rummage Sale, if that is God's bidding. Let us be grateful for a tradition where "order" and "ardor" act in a creative tension to guide our church. On this Reformation Sunday may we celebrate the call to be Reformed and ever Reforming. Thanks be to God and Let God's Reformed people say, Amen!