



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Always Reforming

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 29, 2017

Then Joshua summoned all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, including their elders, leaders, judges, and officers. So they came and presented themselves to God ...

¹⁴“So fear the LORD and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD alone. ¹⁵But if you refuse to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶The people replied, “We would never abandon the LORD and serve other gods. ¹⁷For the LORD our God is the one who rescued us and our ancestors from slavery in the land of Egypt. He performed mighty miracles before our very eyes. As we traveled through the wilderness among our enemies, he preserved us. ¹⁸It was the LORD who drove out the Amorites and the other nations living here in the land. So we, too, will serve the LORD, for he alone is our God.”

¹⁹Then Joshua warned the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy and jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰If you abandon the LORD and serve other gods, he will turn against you and destroy you, even though he has been so good to you.”

²¹But the people answered Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!”

²²“You are a witness to your own decision,” Joshua said. “You have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes,” they replied, “we are witnesses to what we have said.”

²³“All right then,” Joshua said, “destroy the idols among you, and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴The people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God. We will obey him alone.”

Joshua 14:1, 14-24 (NLT)

A Community Celebration

This day, Reformation Sunday, is being celebrated by Christians around the world. This particular year is the 500th anniversary of the event that triggered a history-altering movement. It is, in many ways, the spiritual equivalent of what is done in America each July 4. On that day, declared our official national “birthday” or “independence day,” we remember the sequence of events set in motion centuries ago that resulted in the great blessings we enjoy today. It is a time when, properly celebrated (not so much with hot dogs and parades and fireworks as with more serious reflection and conversation), we remember what sets the United States of America apart, what values lie at our foundation. On the Fourth of July we do not **worship** the Founding Fathers. We honor those men and women who had vision and courage. But we know that they were mere mortals, imperfect people, with flaws and blind spots as well as noble virtues and aspirations. Our nation’s independence holiday is supposed to be a time when each new generation of citizens is taught and reminded and summoned to live up to what has made us great.

In the same way, Christians are not worshipping Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox or any of the great visionaries who were called “Reformers,” nor the Pre-Reformers like Tyndale and Wycliffe and Hus. We are deeply indebted to them, and we benefit from studying their lives and learning from their examples of faith and courage. But it is not to their honor and adulation that we focus our attention. Instead, we concentrate on the values and truths they rediscovered for us so that we can live faithfully in our own times. If Reformation Sunday becomes only a day to pay tribute to the past we have

missed its potential. As July 4 is to citizens of the United States, so is Reformation Sunday a community milestone for Christians. The purposes of a community celebration are the “Three Rs”: to **Remember**, **Rededicate** and, as necessary, **Reform**.

Remember, Rededicate and Reform

For thousands of years this kind of periodic special event has proven to be necessary to sustain a group of people who share a common set of beliefs and values. The proof of the need for remembering, rededication and reform is shown in our scripture text for today. Here is the context of the last chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua. The Supreme Commander of the people of Israel, General Joshua, has come to the end of his successful career. He has led his nation into the Promised Land, and by the almighty hand of God has brought them victory and a new life. They are now blessed, economically, politically and personally, in ways they had never imagined. They are settling into their comfortable existence in their new homeland. But with success and prosperity comes danger.

The danger, lurking behind us constantly due to our imperfect sinful nature, is that we drift away from our roots: we lose our values, become complacent, become spiritually careless, and ultimately become corrupt. Our very success plants the seeds of potential problems. Joshua knows this, and so his final act is to gather all the leaders of his nation together for a great “continental congress” or solemn gathering. At that time he reminds them of their history, and the things that made them a unique nation. (Is this not what American historians do on July 4, and what churches do on Reformation Sunday?) We skipped verses 2 through 13, though you are welcome to read them on your own; they are a detailed review of “Jewish History 101,” up to about the year 1000 BC when Joshua lived.

But it isn’t enough for the retiring General to guide them into remembering. The other two components of a national celebration are also necessary. The people need to rededicate and reform. It is especially necessary because the new generation has not personally experienced the challenges and hardships and sacrifice that their parents

and grandparents had to undergo. Those people, now in their later years as Joshua is, were truly the “Greatest Generation” of Israel. They fought the battles, they witnessed God’s deliverance, they trusted in the Lord. But it is always critical that the **next** generations—especially the ones who have been blessed to inherit the peace and prosperity that was won for them—learn and embrace the same values as those who went before them.

Losing Our Roots

Is this not a great concern, for both our nation and our church? Do not many of you, who are parents and grandparents, feel a great concern for the society in which your kids and grandkids are living that has so significantly strayed from the values upon which America was built? And are you not concerned that the history they are being taught is inadequate, or inaccurate, or biased and distorted by people with their own agenda? [By the way, this is why our church chose the book “If You Can Keep It” by outstanding contemporary Christian author Eric Metaxas as this summer’s reading challenge. It is a simple, easy-to-read, but powerful reminder of our national values, as well as an eloquent call to rededication and reform. If you can persuade a son or daughter, or a grandchild who is in college or is now a young adult, to read one book that will call them back to their heritage as an American, **this is the one.**]

And the church in the western world is likewise struggling because recent generations have largely lost their way and forgotten the biblical truths and values rediscovered and renewed in the Reformation. Europe, the birthplace of this powerful spiritual movement, has become largely a spiritual wasteland. Their society and politics have lost their connection to their roots.

My next door neighbor had a huge and flourishing tree in his yard, and during Hurricane Irma that tree was uprooted and tipped on its side. The huge root system was exposed. Many roots were severed; others are dangling in the air, unable to draw water and nourishment from the ground. That tree is dying—because of the loss of its roots. It is for me a dramatic picture of what is happening in once-

Christian countries in Europe that have allowed their spiritual roots to be pulled up. No wonder Europe has no answer to the mass migration of Muslims, no spiritual alternative to combat Islam. Most Europeans are clinging to an empty materialism that can never satisfy the inner needs of mankind, and that offers no God and no meaning or hope, beyond the tangible things of the world.

It is my passion, in the years God grants to me, to do what I can to help the American church avoid following Europe's path to spiritual decline. I can relate to Joshua, and to his concern for the younger generations of his people as he and his generation are soon departing. It is why I and the leaders of this congregation are committed to helping raise up and train the next generation of pastors for American churches. [And thank you to all who have supported our scholarship and mentorship program so generously! I was on the seminary campus three weeks ago, and you will be thrilled to meet the students we will be bringing here in January—gifted young people, totally sold out for Christ.]

The General's Challenge

Back to Joshua 24: the great leader puts the challenge of rededication squarely before his people. "Choose today whom you will serve ... But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD." It is always a choice—a personal choice. No matter how faithful and devoted your grandparents or parents may have been, you have to choose for yourself. And so do your children and grandchildren. Every generation faces its critical decision. The church of God (just like the nation of Israel, and just like a democratic republic such as America) is always a generation away from decline. Benjamin Franklin's comment on the drafting of our Constitution—that we are being given a republic "if we can keep it"—reminds us that "keeping" the values of a nation or a church is entrusted to us, and then we must pass it on to those who follow.

So Joshua challenges his people to choose which God they will serve. They respond enthusiastically, but the leader warns them: it will not be easy, and they must be ever-vigilant. There will be times when

they drift, and the faithful and courageous among them must do the hard and risky work of calling them back to reform. This pattern is repeated regularly in the Old Testament: commitment to God (which brings blessing) is followed by complacency and decline as years go by, then by reform and renewal.

The U-Turn

It is exactly what was happening 500 years ago. The church in Europe had drifted into decay and corruption. Catholic and Protestant scholars and historians alike tell us that the spiritual and moral state of the church had moved very far from the teachings of Jesus. Power, wealth, military might, political intrigue, sexual permissiveness, an uneducated and unconverted clergy, and the removal of the Bible from the life of God's people were all symptoms of drift. The warnings of Joshua to his people 2,500 years earlier about the corrupting power of sin had been fulfilled by the time of Martin Luther.

Yet the Spirit of God had not abandoned His church. That Spirit awakened in courageous men and women, who at great personal risk called the church back to its roots. The Reformation was not really about introducing something **new**, but rather doing a U-turn and circling back to its **origins**. The teaching and preaching and writing of Luther and Calvin did not consist of original ideas, but rather of rediscovering and highlighting the words and principles of Jesus and Paul and Peter and the rest of scripture.

Here's the simple but profound truth: that when things drift and decline, the only healthy way **forward** is to actually go **backward**—to return again to where we started before we lost our way. That is what needs to happen in today's church. It is what must keep happening in every new time. It is what must happen in America as well. The frightening trends of moral permissiveness and political divisiveness and spiritual decline need to turn around, or America will suffer greatly—not that God will “zap” us with judgment but that the inevitable consequences of our own bad choices will finally be felt.

One of the great slogans or mottos of the Reformation (first credited to one of John Calvin's leading lieutenants, a Dutch Reformed pastor) was the phrase: "**A reformed church, always reforming according to the Word of God.**" The four Latin words to begin that slogan—*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda*—have been frequently printed or repeated. Regrettably, some of my fellow pastors in our own times, infected by modernism and a desire to constantly keep up with a changing secular culture, have tried to make that phrase mean that the church has to continually change with the times. But the full statement, in fact, says exactly the opposite. The tendency of human nature is always to stray from our roots, to lose our way, to become corrupted. That is why we need to continually be called back to our origin—to be "**reformed according to the Word of God.**"

The Legacy of the Reformation

Scholars this year have been sacrificing forests of trees to write their summaries and evaluations of the historical consequences of the Protestant Reformation five centuries ago. As a very partial list, these are some of the blessings we experience (and perhaps take for granted) that came about ultimately from the rediscovery of Scripture and the working out of its truths in our personal lives, the life of the church, and the life of society:

- ◆ A renewed trust in salvation by faith in Christ, not by trying to earn our way to heaven through moral and religious deeds (of which we can never accumulate enough, and would always be a hopeless quest).
- ◆ A renewed confidence in Scripture as the Word of God.
- ◆ Translation of the Bible and the experience of worship into the language of each nation and people, so all can discover the truth for themselves and can worship God with their whole mind and heart.
- ◆ The open access to God for confession and forgiveness [and taking all our needs to Him in prayer], rather than through the human intermediary of a priest.

- ◆ The role of all believers (clergy and lay alike) as equal in the church, each one called to his or her ministry and service.
- ◆ The value of marriage and family life.
- ◆ The importance of universal education, and the liberation of the mind to explore the mysteries of creation and pursue progress.
- ◆ The dignity and value of work and the principles that paved the way for capitalism and the explosion of prosperity in the western world.
- ◆ The principles of human rights and dignity and democracy, which are fleshed out in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and have been the model for most countries on earth.
- ◆ The elimination of slavery and the enhanced dignity and worth of women.
- ◆ The burning passion to take the Gospel to all people, fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ.

Even those who have forgotten the history of the Reformation and turned their back on the church are still the beneficiaries of what the Reformers and those who followed in their footsteps have created, to the great good of all mankind.

A Clarion Call

We celebrate this movement of reform because our world would be profoundly different today had it not occurred. Just as Joshua summoned his people to **remember, rededicate** and, when necessary, **reform**; and just as Martin Luther nailed his call for reform to the church door; so I believe the clarion call is as relevant to us today as it was 3,000 and 500 years ago. It is time for us to go back to our origins: to remember, rededicate and reform. ■