

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Always Reforming: Jesus Expected Us to Change
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Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 16:12-15

We are starting a new sermon series to kick off 2021. We are calling this series “always reforming.” As you may know the Presbyterian church became possible because of the reformation over 500 years ago and we have a phrase we like to use to describe ourselves which is “reformed and always reforming.” This series will highlight some of the issues we have reformed over the years. Things like the church’s stance on divorce, slavery, women’s leadership, and LGBTQ inclusion. On some of these topics, before we even talk about why the church changed, you might give a resounding “Thank God.” For other topics, you may find yourself still on the fence. That’s totally okay. The Church on the global level is still on the fence about divorce and women in leadership and slavery, and LGBTQ inclusion too.

For a church like ours that proudly affirms we are of the reformed tradition, Jesus’ words here in John 16 are a root from which an always reforming church gets nutrients. Jesus is facing the last day that he will be with the disciples in the same way he has been for the last few years. The next time they see Jesus alive he will be something altogether different, something resurrected. He knows this will change their relationship and how they listen to him, SO in the final hours Jesus tells them this.

Jesus is making an introduction to the disciples on behalf of the Holy Spirit, passing off the torch of authority so that when the time comes they will trust the Spirit. Jesus expects the disciples to continue to grow in their understanding of who God is. That growth will be facilitated by the movements and inspiration of the Spirit.

Jesus had three years....three years to teach and minister to the disciples. Hold that against the 13 years of learning we insist that our children get of public education and four more years of higher education that we value, and it makes us wonder what Jesus was able to get across to these people at all. If you went to a doctor and they said, “Don’t worry. I have studied for three years,” you would run the other way. We would not want someone with three years of experience attempting to fix our bodies. So why do we surrender our souls to the writings of disciples who only had three years of instruction, or worse, three minutes? Paul never met Jesus in the flesh yet his writings make up most of what we have in the second testament.

We surrender our souls to these writings because we also have the Spirit. An authority that has been with God since the beginning of time, and an authority sent to us with the blessings of Jesus. The task of the Spirit is to guide us to things when we are ready and able to understand them.

When it comes to children, we understand what Jesus means when he says, “You cannot bear to hear this now.” Just pull out any children’s Bible and you will find giant holes, stories missing, words ignored. It’s obvious why...they cannot yet bear them. We offer to our children that which they can bear and trust they will learn more later.

We recently had a group of adults in this church go through the confirmation journey again. All of them, every single one, learned something they could not have born in years prior. Things they needed certain life experiences to help them know God better. I will venture to say they also heard something discussed that maybe stretched them past what they were willing to tackle now. I love facts that can stretch our minds.

For example, Cleopatra lived closer in time to the moon landing than she did the construction of the great pyramids. I'm sure the math works out on that, but it is still hard to comprehend.

Or my favorite fact, if you free fall for 38 minutes you would cover the distance from the north pole to the south pole. For that one the math doesn't even seem to work out, but it's true. And it's mind blowing unless you are ready for it.

These kinds of facts can derail a person's whole learning experience. Imagine if we explained in detail the crucifixion to a four-year-old. It would be very damaging and shape their entire relationship with faith and Jesus. With the disciples, Jesus knew he had to stick to the basics to get the foundation set in those three years. Jesus was okay with this because he knew the Spirit would step in and lead God's people into each new reform of faith and theology.

It is a great tragedy that some Christians only believe that which is explicitly written about in the Bible. These writers were worthy but not sufficient. If they were, we wouldn't need the Spirit. If all we needed were the words between these covers, the Spirit could have stayed cozy with the rest of the trinity. But we need the Spirit to guide us into ALL THE TRUTH. Especially the truth no one was ready to discuss when the Bible was being written.

Now some will hear that and shout blasphemy! God is the same yesterday today and tomorrow...and I agree. GOD is the same, but we have not been and will not be the same. Our understanding of God has improved and will continue to improve. And with the power of the Holy Spirit as our guide, it will be a knowing closer and closer to the trueness of God that Jesus wanted to reveal but could not because of the limitations of the time. God is the same, we are not.

Neglecting the movements of the Spirit is blasphemous. Jesus never wanted our goal to be to KNOW but to be on a journey of knowing, improving our knowledge. In many ways, this book can become an idol pulling us away from what the Spirit is trying to lead us to if we give too much value to words. And yet we can't get rid of it because this book is a tool the Spirit uses to show us God never changes. It is us, our understanding, that changes. And the Spirit reveals new things in the living scripture. While we go through this series we will see the verses that supported slavery, kept women from leadership, and torn life from LGBTQ siblings. And we will see scripture that outright condemns owning humans, lifts women up as called leaders, and affirms LGBTQ siblings are a gift of God's own giving. It's all in there. The only difference is our readiness to learn what the Spirit is teaching us.

Now some will hear that and point fingers saying you can not cherry-pick scripture, but brothers and sister and siblings, we all do it. We have to because there are things in here we are not yet ready to understand. To test this out, spend the next week reading Song of Solomon. I guarantee every day you will throw the Bible down and insist "That was not there before." How does a religion with a history of a prudish sexual theology also have in

its holy scripture blatantly erotic poetry? We cling to the scripture we can understand, that with which we are comfortable.

It's not wrong, but it also means we can never declare, I'm DONE! We can never say I KNOW what that scripture means. I understand exactly how God behaves. There must also be a healthy dose of humility that maybe we cannot yet bear those lessons now. Maybe there is something in here I keep overlooking because the Spirit knows I'm not ready for that level of understanding.

SO we cling even tighter to the Spirit. The way the early church experienced the Spirit can help us know how to hold on. In their encounters with the Spirit, they either experience the Spirit in community, or in the fruits.

The Spirit's entrance on Pentecost is to the community. It is at a gathering of the disciples that the Spirit arrives. Everyone receives the Spirit and together they are able to achieve the purpose of proclaiming the gospel. Together they knew the way forward because they all had a similar inspiration. They felt the same urgings to speak to all people in their own language.

So the first test is to see if multiple people are having the same encounter with the Spirit. Yes, I said test. Scripture tells us we are allowed to test the Spirit. Testing the Spirit within the community sorts out the confusion of a powerful individual making claims of the Spirit with which the rest of the community does not agree. If the Spirit is asking the community to make a change, the Spirit will inspire more than one person and convict them of the truth the Spirit wants them to learn.

This action of the Spirit is recognized in the Presbyterian church and is why we use committees and councils to make decisions. Even if I, as a Pastor, wanted the church to make a change, I don't have that power. It is up to the Session, the gathering of elders, to make changes. If they collectively feel the Spirit's movement, they will agree and vote to make the change.

This holds true for our national church where big changes happen as well. If someone calls for a change to our constitution, like we did when we added the Belhar confession, which speaks against racism, we begin a process of discernment. A process designed to feel the Spirit's movement. It can be frustrating at times, but a decision is never made quickly in the Presbyterian church. We purposely slow things down because we want to avoid the failings of following a whim. We always leave time for the Spirit to move. There are years of learning, teaching, discussing that happens before a vote is even brought up. When enough Presbyteries agree the change is something the Spirit wants of us, we vote. For the vote, commissioners are chosen and told to vote their conscience. This means they cannot be told how to vote by any other person, especially those in authority. They must remain open to hear the debate on the floor and feel the Spirit's movement to vote how they think the Spirit is leading the church.

Usually, this is decided by a majority or $\frac{2}{3}$ vote but there is a wave happening now of people who think all decisions should be made unanimously. We shall see how the Spirit leads the church on this matter in years to come.

This first test, checking within the community, is necessary when it is a community change. However, it does work with personal belief and growth as well. Talking to others who have faith can help us sort out which feelings are the Spirit's calling and which are fears that we harbor.

Another test that can be very helpful to us in personal or communal reforms is “Looking for the fruits of the Spirit.” Scripture lays out the fruits of the Spirit for us. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And Scripture says wherever these things are is where God resides. God loves to be among the fruits and also brings the fruits to us so they are like a bread crumb trail that leads us to God.

The fruits of the Spirit can help us test all kinds of things in our lives: a pastor’s teachings or a community's theology. If the thing is producing fruits of the Spirit, it is of the Spirit. If not, then there is a reform that needs to be made so those fruits can improve. The fruits of the Spirit affirm the presence of God. If we see them in places we did not expect, we need to begin asking why. Why are they there? And why did I assume the fruits would not be there?

I want you to conjure in your imagination the image of a motorcycle biker gang. Make them the baddest roughest group of bikers you can think of: face tattoos, worn-in leather, furrowed brows all with questionable lifestyles and hard-lived days. Now imagine a nine year-old girl in a pink tutu standing in the middle of them, and place them in the middle of a courtroom. This is the image I saw on a website recently. So I clicked to see what was up. The biker gang was there escorting the girl to a court case against her abusive father. The gang had learned that kids often do not give good testimonies when they have to sit in front of their abusers because they become fearful. The biker’s solution: befriend the child and go with them so the child knows they have 10 other scarier, bigger adults who are their friends who will protect them against their abuser. That was not what I expected to read. I did not expect to read about love, gentleness, kindness, and self-control when I saw that biker gang. I had to reform my assumptions about biker gangs because I found the fruits of Spirit in their midst.

Some will say this acceptance of “worldly” things is inappropriate. That when reformed churches allow divorce or LGBTQ inclusion it takes the easy way out by giving in to the culture and creating a digestible gospel. This is not an easy route. It is not easy to admit we were wrong. It is not easy to say we used scripture to allow slavery. It is not easy to say we have committed genocide in the name of God’s glory. It is not easy to admit we have torn families apart and driven our children to suicide because six verses seem to suggest, in our reading, that homosexual relationships are wrong.

It would be so much easier to say we do these things because The Bible made us do it. It would be easier to lock scripture into the understanding of the previous generation before we were ready to bear it and not learn anything new. But we are ready to bear more. And it is not faithful to ignore the Spirit and turn our backs on the Fruit even when they pop up in unexpected or uncomfortable places.

We need to listen to our community and find the similar inspirations the Spirit is planting inside us. We need to follow the trail of good fruits wherever they lead us. Even into the center of a scary biker gang. If in 500 years we are the same church we are now, how demeaning that will be to the Spirit’s presence to completely ignore all the work that was planned for us. We are able to bear more and must continue to reform until we have brought the kin-dom of God to earth. That is the plan. To grow, more and more into God’s people and better understand the truth of the gospel.

Let us become able to bear that, to bear the full truth of the gospel. Lord hear our prayer.