

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 17, 2007

Series: Grounded and Growing in the Reformed Tradition

A Family Heritage

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 8:31-38

It was moving-in day at the university.
The young man looked around the tiny room in the freshman dorm
in which his belongings had been carefully arranged
leaving space for his new roommate who would be arriving soon.
The family's SUV sat in the parking lot, unloaded and empty,
waiting to transport his mother and father and younger sister
on the 3 hour drive back to the family's home.
He turns to his mother,
who has tears in the corners of her eyes,
and reaches to give her a hug.
As she holds her firstborn in a tight embrace
she gives him one last bit of advice:
"John, remember who your father is."

Now, depending on who John's father IS this statement could be
a veiled threat!
Or, depending on who John IS,
if he was more likely to be found drinking at the frat house
than studying in the library
this could be a desperate plea not to embarrass the family.
Or it could be a reassuring reminder
that though they were miles away, John's father
and with him of course, John's mother, and John's whole family
would always be there for him.

"John, remember who your father is"
It's not a bad piece of counsel to give a young man or woman
venturing out from home for the first time
at the beginning of the journey into adulthood.
In a traditional, patriarchal sort of way,
it's the same as saying,
"Remember who YOU are; Remember who your FAMILY is;
and hold onto what's important.
Many things may change in your life and in the world,
but some things will always abide."

For Christians, though,
remembering our fathers and our families
is only a *penultimate* memory,
a next-to-ultimate memory.
The ultimate memory that gives us our deepest identity
is remembering that we belong to God,
the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Our greatest blessing and strength is in remembering that,
even more than our earthly families,
we belong to the family of God.

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Today, we begin a series of sermons intended to help us
remember who our family is: our family of faith.
As our globally-connected lives and culture change rapidly around us,
we need to hold onto those things that remain the same,
those aspect of our Christian family heritage
that will abide every change.
And yet we need to respond faithfully to our context,
learning to discern, as we engage the world,
what is of God and what is not.
As Presbyterian Christians,
this means remembering that we are the inheritors
of an abundant and generous heritage,
a theological, spiritual and religious heritage
we call the Reformed Tradition.

This sermon series, "Grounded and Growing in the Reformed Tradition"
which will carry us through the summer months,
is a series that has been brewing within me
for a while now.

This summer seems a good time to preach it
given the recent pull-out of two churches in Pittsburgh Presbytery,
and several others in the denomination,
who are transferring to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
a denomination that really does suit them better.
Peacefully separating is an appropriate thing for Presbyterians to do
after they first have made a strenuous effort to coexist peacefully.
However, I was saddened and frustrated when I read in the news
that many of the members of Memorial Park and Beverly Heights
felt they needed to leave the denomination
in order to "get back to scripture."
In addition to this concern

about the PC(USA) not being close enough to the Bible,
they also seem to be dissatisfied with what we believe about Jesus.
But I have read and heard in person some of their complaints,
and it seems to me that many of these disgruntled folks
do not really to know what we believe about Jesus,
as a denomination.

What they say we believe
doesn't really square with what we say we believe
in our confessions and in church government.

Be that as it may,
rather than sit around in frustration and anger,
it seems good for us to turn our thoughts and emotions
to some positive use – like remembering who our family is.

So, on with the sermons...

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Who is our family?
What heritage have we received
as Christians in the Reformed Tradition?
And how does this tradition serve us well right now,
as we respond to the challenges
of being Christian in the world today?

I want to begin in the same place the Westminster Confession begins
and where all good Reformed theology begins:
with scripture.

We begin there because
whenever we start making claims
about God, and the world, and ourselves,
a fair question to ask is,
“How do you know that?”

Growing up in the Bible Belt,
I used to see this bumper sticker that said,
“The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it!”
I wouldn't be surprised if you've seen this slogan around Pittsburgh too,
since I've always contended that the Bible Belt has a panhandle –
and it's Western PA.

It is true that one of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation was
sola scriptura – scripture alone.

But we have always acknowledged that
understanding *exactly what scripture leads us to believe and do*
is often a bit more complicated in actual practice
than just knowing *what the Bible says*.

If I could just lock myself in a room with a chair and a Bible
and by reading the Bible I could know definitively what God
is leading me to believe and do in my life,
I would have little need for you,
nor you for me.

And we would have little need of history,
or a tradition, or even a Presbyterian form of church government.
In fact, the church would quickly become unnecessary
if knowing God and God's will were such a solitary enterprise.

But Reformed Christians have always held it true
that we can only come to know God and God's will fully
as we listen to the scriptures together – as a spiritual family.
And we listen not only to those members of the family who are still alive,
but to those who have gone before us.

Shared in Children's Sermon: [[Just yesterday,
Mary Ellen received a rare blessing in the mail.
Her cousin mailed her one volume of a collection of travel diaries
which had been kept by their grandmother
from 1916 to 1973.
This volume, 1919 to 1924
included the ocean voyage she took
to the Philippines, where she was married to Johnson Boyce Vernon
and where they made their first home
as they served as Presbyterian missionaries in a village there.
It also included a trip to Italy and to a particular shop in Naples
where Mary Ellen's grandfather bought a small painting
that we now have in our home.
We plan to visit the shop while we are on mission in Naples this summer.]]]]]]

I shared with the children
what a thrill it was to Mary Ellen yesterday,
to open her grandmother's travel diary
and read the lines of her ancestor's life
including wedding preparations and setting up their little house
in the Philippines in 1924.

What a treasured gift!

This is the spirit with which we receive the writings of our spiritual ancestors
in the Reformed Tradition – a treasured gift of our past.
Though we can't fully understand everything penned there,
because the full detail has been lost to us,
we still can garner an understanding of what they heard the Bible saying
and how they believed God and followed Christ
years ago.

When we value a tradition,
it means we do not give preference to the living over the dead.
Tradition means learning across generations.

But now, here's an important thing to affirm:
If we do not give preference to the living over the dead
(that is, we listen to and value our deceased ancestors),
neither do we give preference to the dead over the living
(which would be to jettison the experience
of the current members of the Reformed Christian family).
Today's experience matters as much as yesterday's,
and tomorrow's experience will matter the same.

To accept unquestionably what is handed down from the past
is to deny that God is still living and active in the present.
To be unwilling to examine the tradition we have received
and to do so with a critical eye,
is to elevate the words of men and women
above their rightful place in relation to God.

God has given us brains to think rationally –
and the Reformed Tradition has always affirmed the goodness
of the life of the mind in service to God.

So, what I have sketched out here, briefly, are 4 sources of insight
for discerning who God is and who we are
and what is true about the world.

These sources of insight are:
Scripture - the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments)
Tradition – over the two millennia history of the Christian Church
Reason - rational thinking and sensible interpretation.
Experience – our personal and communal journey in Christ

The Methodists usually get credit for naming these four sources of insight:
known as the Methodist or Wesleyan Quadrilateral.
But these sources have always been operative and acknowledged
in the Reformed Tradition.

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It is interesting to see these sources of insight at work in the scriptures we have read today.

First, in the promise to Abram (who would later be renamed Abraham), that through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

This is a promise of God which becomes the foundation of the Jewish and the Christian traditions, and is so foundational that it has been designated as scripture for both traditions.

Later, in Jesus' argument with the Pharisees,

it is this promise, this scripture, that they are trying to interpret.

What does it mean to be children of our father Abraham?

How are the Jews to understand Jesus in relation to that promise?

The arguments here are based on experience, and employ reason,

in order to make sense of scripture

and both to critique and affirm

the way the tradition has interpreted this scripture over the years.

Unfortunately, these particular Pharisees seem unwilling

to examine critically the tradition they have received.

Their tradition has become static, stagnant, and stuck – a dead tradition.

Jesus is trying to revive it, not abolish it, but revive and fulfill it.

By including these other sources of insight along with the Bible,

we are not diminishing the authority of scripture.

We are not saying that scripture is an equal partner,

but is normative partner,

the authoritative and indispensable source of God's Word.

but that it cannot be accessed apart from

experience, reason, and tradition.

Anyone who claims to do so can easily be shown to be mistaken.

The Bible is the Word of God,

but God is not trapped on its pages.

God is alive in our experience, in our minds and hearts,

today and in years past and in years to come.

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So, in closing,

I want to present a quick 5-point picture of the Reformed Tradition.

This was offered by an eminent scholar
in Reformed and Calvinist theology, Brian Gerrish:
Gerrish contends that instead of defining the Reformed Tradition
by a set of doctrines or ethical positions,
we are better off speaking about Reformed Habits of Mind.
Doctrines and ethics that are fixed and immovable can become idols
and can easily replace the living Word
who is not ink on paper, but is a person,
the living Lord Jesus Christ.
Being in a strong and healthy relationship with Christ
means establishing good habits of mind and heart.

The Reformed Tradition is characterized by 5 of these habits:

First of all,

Deference to the tradition. That is, we value the tradition.

We do not give priority to the living over the dead,
but humbly listen to those who have gone before
as we seek to understand the Word of God for today.

The second habit is

A Critical Eye toward the tradition.

That is, we do not blindly accept what is passed down,
but we continually hold it in prayer and listen to it
together with the scripture,
asking whether it is God's truth for today.

As the Scot's Confession says:

"Councils may err,
and that in matters of great weight and importance."
We remain vigilant for error within our own tradition
our own thoughts and inclinations,
and open to those who would criticize us.

Thus, the third of these habits is

Openness to God's truth wherever it may be found.

God made the whole world and God can use the whole world
to reveal God's self and God's truth.

Romans 1 says that since the creation,

"God's eternal power and divine nature
have been seen in the things God has made."

That means truth can be learned not just within the walls of the church,
but from beyond the church,
anywhere in the world God made and loves,
with the scriptures and the Holy Spirit

as the final arbiters of truth

Then,

Practicality in its application.

Our Book of Order in the Presbyterian Church affirms that
“truth is in order to goodness.”

That is, what we believe matters for what we do.

Our faith must be lived out. If it is real faith, it must be practiced.

Finally, we are Reformed and always being reformed,

According to the Word of God.

And the Word of God, first of all, is Jesus Christ,
the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth,
who is witnessed to in the Old and New Testaments.

We never go about this enterprise of Christian living
without Jesus, or the Bible that bears witness to him.

Again and again we return to scripture
and we ask God to show us the way.

Well, that’s enough to get us started.

Please bring these back with you,
and each week you’ll receive a new sheet to add.

At the end of the summer you’ll have a nice little notebook
on what it means to be a Christian
who is grounded and growing in the Reformed Tradition.

Let us use the words of our tradition,
and say together what we believe...