

“Reformation Sunday - A world-wide family of faith”, a sermon based on Luke 18:9-14, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on Sunday 27 October 2019.

When we enter the world of faith, we are coming to play with fire. When faith takes hold of us, God unlocks the deepest recesses of our humanity. When we join a church, God puts us in touch with life’s most powerful forces, which can be turned for good or harm. Because the Christian faith has set people free and tied people down. Through the church, oppressed people have been liberated and liberated people have been oppressed. Especially when the church has aligned itself with power or money. Nationalism religiously validated has become terror. Ethnic hatred religiously supported has become genocide. Megalomaniacs with religious allies have become murderers. So there is deep spirit here, for good and for harm.

One alternative to such power is docility, fitting in, never challenging the unhealthy forces around us. Playing down the significance of faith. To corral faith in a corner of life so it has little influence on the most significant aspects of our lives. To suck faith of power so it can be neither harmful nor liberating. But the Spirit of God seems to erupt even when we try to shut her down. God’s Spirit is untameable, uncontrollable, irrepressible, uncontainable. That spirit is always at work building, shaping, reforming the church to be God’s church. We cannot stop her even if we wanted to.

That conviction is core to our tradition. The Presbyterian Church is part of the world-wide Reformed family of faith. A tradition that grew out of concern about the damage the church can do and a longing that the church would reflect the one who liberates and saves. A tradition concerned that people would be free of oppression and unhealthy religion. A tradition concerned that you and I, in our personal lives, would be reformed by Christ and were always being reformed by Christ. So our tradition keeps asking us questions, subjecting our faith to scrutiny, inviting us to keep growing and developing in faith and life, tugging beyond what we know and trust. Neither our church nor we ourselves are thought to have arrived. There is more growing to do. No framework is presented as the final word. No package is offered as a sure-fire way of being fully human. No church is imagined as having got it together. We are always in need of reformation and we are always being reformed.

What are the practices that enable that? Our tradition speaks of the marks of the church. The early reformers named them as the pure preaching of the gospel of Christ and the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and communion. Later some added church discipline rightly administered. The marks of the church - the pure preaching of the gospel of Christ, the right administration of the sacraments and church discipline rightly administered.

That is why we put emphasis on the Bible and interpreting it, on ministry trained to access sound scholarship, on leadership in touch with the church beyond our congregation, on the celebration of the sacraments, and on enabling people in the church to act in ways that reflect the nature of Christ. Early in its life, the church learned that one way we can tame the gospel is by letting us in our locality alone determine what is true or untrue. In his inaugural lecturer as Professor of New Testament at the University of Otago, Paul Trebilco outlined how the earliest Christian communities saw themselves as part of a wider movement. They placed their stories of Jesus alongside the stories of other Christian communities that brought different questions and perspectives.

The apostle Paul wrote letters highlighting how local churches were reformed by rediscovering central truths and core practices. Groups of representatives gathered in council to talk about what was happening in their communities and make crucial decisions. Congregations provided financial support to other congregations who though different were seen as part of the same family. People with the gift of leadership like Timothy were sent to help lead a congregation out of difficulty. That dynamic continues today.

We are not a church because we call ourselves a church or worship in a certain kind of building. We are a church because we are acknowledged as a local expression of a world-wide family of faith – our national connection making us part of the church universal – and we seek to remain in touch with the church universal through our membership in the World Council of Churches and the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia and the Pacific Conference of Churches, all in conversation with the other great traditions of the church.

Our faith family, the World Communion of Reformed Churches has about 80 million people. By interacting with people in realms beyond our own local experience, our perspective is broadened and our framework is reformed, constantly. Ministers of word and sacrament are ordained to represent the church universal. Our ministers come from beyond the congregation, so that in the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments and the exercising of discipline, congregations are opened to wider experiences.

What makes us Presbyterian is not our particular ways but our adherence to the marks of the church and our participation in the world-wide Presbyterian family. Let me give two examples. At present we are trialling monthly communion. For some New Zealand Presbyterians, a Presbyterian church was one that celebrated communion quarterly or celebrated communion less than the Catholic church or celebrated communion by distributing the elements to people seated in pews. But that does not make it Presbyterian. Our tradition began wanting more frequent celebration of communion than the Catholic church of the time, not less. For nearly forty years, the mother church of our branch of Presbyterianism, the church of John Knox in Edinburgh, St Giles', has celebrated communion every Sunday, and by people coming forward to stand in a circle.

Another example. Our experience of worship may be that it is less demonstrative but that does not make worship Presbyterian. It simply reflects an aspect of the culture of some of the people who make up some of our congregations. As a cultural dynamic it is always in need of being reformed by the pure preaching of the gospel of Christ, the right administration of the sacraments and the proper exercise of discipline.

The gospel of the day is an encouragement to humility, to sensing the limits of our own perspective on faith and life. And our participation in the church catholic continually draws us towards fuller, richer, deeper experiences of faith. Let me bring this principle closer by speaking of three people who have done this for me.

In our world-wide family of faith, we are alongside the warm, formidably intelligent and encouraging Ofelia Ortega, one of the theologians of the Presbyterian Church of Cuba, who has continued to proclaim the good news of Christ despite Cuba's official atheism. We are alongside Najla Kassab, who is President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and who is a

minister of the Evangelical Church of Lebanon and Syria. She is a lively, thoughtful and courageous leader who frequently travels to and from Syria to encourage the church there. We are alongside Peter Gai, the towering Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, as he works with others to persuade the leaders of that nation to end the civil war that has affected millions of people for more than a generation.

You might imagine that these people are far from us, unrelated to us, but that is not the faith of this church. We are brothers and sisters with them as part of the same body as we long and pray and work for the unity of that body with Catholics and Pentecostals, Orthodox and Lutherans and more. God's Spirit is a uniting spirit and God's Spirit is always calling us beyond our experience, beyond our past, beyond our tradition, to communion with all God's people. And as God's Spirit lifts us beyond ourselves, national and ecclesiastical pride dissolves, we become again a church reformed and always being reformed.

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called to be a community following Jesus



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