

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
October 27, 2013

Luke 18:9-14  
“Power Change”

You might think it strange that I quoted two versions of essentially the same affirmation on cover of this bulletin. They come from the section in the *Book of Order* on confessions. The first is from the old *Book of Order* and the second from the new *Book of Order*. The first was in place for 26 years of my ministry and the second will probably be in place for the next 26 years and beyond.

For me, these are among the most important words in our lives as Christians and particularly as Reformed Presbyterian Christians. I long ago memorized the first and am about to implant permanently in my brain the second.

The first:

The church affirms “Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,” “The church reformed, always reforming,” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” – Book of Order, 2009/2011

The second:

The church affirms “Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei,” that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit. – Book of Order, 2011/2013

Today, we welcome three new members into our church. All three affirmed their faith in the session (our governing body) and today they make public their confession. We are excited about their becoming members of our church and we know that the angels are rejoicing in heaven.

Newcomers attend a newcomer/enquirer class before becoming members and in most classes, I quote this phrase from the *Book of Order* and add that if this were not true I would not be a pastor or Christian because it would say that we are stuck as Christians. That’s why I call us “*dynamic* Presbyterian Reformed Christians,” a *dynamic* Presbyterian Reformed Church.”

Our faith has a solid history and foundation, and moves and permeates through future years. It began with Jesus who interpreted the Hebrew Bible and culture in a new way. The early church was formed and became and continued as the Roman Catholic Church with a split into Catholic and Orthodox in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and then another split into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant in the 16<sup>th</sup>

century (on October 31, 1517 with Martin Luther's legendary hammering of his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg – and that's why we celebrate Reformation Sunday each year on the day closest to this date).

The Protestant Church became a whole bunch of denominations of which Presbyterian is one. Presbyterians began in Scotland after its founder John Knox spent time with John Calvin in Geneva. Presbyterians passed through Ireland and England on their way to the US and arrived on our shores in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and branched into various Presbyterian expressions, the largest being our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I value the PC (USA) because it is open to new ideas and to new ways God is moving through history. We are reformed, always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the spirit. From our solid base, we are open to more light and new insights as we interact with new scientific findings and cultural events of the day.

In this spirit, an insight came to me in the past few years that helped me see more clearly the place of sin in the world.

Confessions of the Reformation era refer to "original sin." The Shorter Catechism adopted by the Scots in 1647 states: "The sinfulness of that estate where into man fell consists in: the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it."

Modern faith statements in our *Book of Confessions* don't speak about "original sin." They speak of the fact of sin, which we see in the world in human and environmental abuse, violence and greed, etc.

The insight that came to me was from a modern-day Martin Luther, Matthew Fox, a former Catholic priest who travelled to Wittenberg and posted a new set of 95 theses on the church there. He published the theses in a book called, appropriately, *A New Reformation*. He takes on the idea of "original sin" and speaks instead of original woundedness.

In theses 32 and 33, he writes, "Original Sin is an ultimate expression of a Punitive Father God and is not a biblical teaching. But Original Blessing (goodness and grace) is biblical. The term *original wound* better describes the separation humans experience on leaving the womb and entering the world – a world that is often unjust and unwelcoming – than does the term Original Sin."

In other words, babies are beautiful and blessed at birth. Life's knocks derail them and some of the wounds come from those who love them most. I know this personally as a son and a father. Everyone is wounded in some way and

life becomes a process of healing our wounds. Henri Nouwen calls members of faith communities, “Wounded Healers.”

Matthew Fox’s description describes how we slip into thoughts and behaviors that depart from a loving, caring, accepting, compassionate, peace and justice-affirming God. Our faith brings us back to God’s goodness and grace. We are reformed individually and communally and are always reforming according to the word of God and the call of the spirit.

The new definition as we have seen puts a new angle on the dictum. It states that the church affirms... ‘The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God’ in the power of the Spirit. This is “power change” as if to say we need the power of the spirit to affect change in our lives. It’s much easier to cut through a big piece of hard wood with a power saw than with a handsaw. It also says that change is not an option.

Take the Pharisee in the gospel text today. He’s praying in the temple and looks over to a tax collector also praying there, and says, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’”

The “Confession of 1967” in our *Book of Confessions* states that, “No one is more subject to ... judgment than the one who assumes that he or she is guiltless before God or morally superior to others.” There’s no room for growth. There’s no change, whereas the tax collector “standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

Matthew writes in a Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” in other words, blessed are those who know their need of God for theirs is the realm of heaven. Jesus concludes, “I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

God ain’t finished with us yet, even the Pharisee, who would do well to appropriate the Presbyterian affirmation of the church, and thus of individuals in the church, always to be reformed according to the Word of God in the power of the spirit.

Proverbially, there are none so blind as those who will not see. I bet we know or knew someone like that. Perhaps we have slipped into that place ourselves. For them, or us we need change, a power change that only the Holy Spirit can give and our prayers do it for ourselves and for the other or others. It’s done through prayer-guided intervention. It’s done through advocacy and action inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit.

We are reformed always to be reformed. We know that change is hard and that change is necessary – it's the only constant, as they say – and we know that the best change comes in the power of the the Holy Spirit. Pray for it, claim it, and you will have it.

In conclusion, a shout out to the Roman Catholic Church via their new pontiff, Pope Francis: In recent interview (and ironically in true reformation spirit) he addressed the topic of faith and certainty. If someone has the answers to all the questions, Francis said, "that is the proof that God is not with him." The great leaders of the faith have always left room for uncertainty. "You must leave room for the Lord, not for your certainties." There is one principle about which the pope is certain: "God is in every person's life...Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person's life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life" (*America*, September 30). [Quoted in the *Christian Century* October 16, 2013]. Amen.