

Sermon for July 21, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Deut. 11: 8, 18-21; Jeremiah 31: 31-38; Matt. 1: 1-6; 15-17
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Lord Jesus Christ, may you, the True Word, be heard in these human words. Amen.

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Knowing our identities and our family lineage is quite popular these days, judging by the plethora of DNA testing companies. We each come from somewhere and from specific people; we didn't appear out of thin air. Often, knowing where we come from and whose people we are helps us to understand ourselves better—why we respond the way we do; why we have certain biases; why we value some things and not others; and why we keep certain traditions. For instance, boiled custard is a must for Christmas on my father's side of the family. No boiled custard, no Christmas.

In that same vein, knowing our past and proclaiming our past is what makes our denomination unique. As Reformed Presbyterians, we come from a certain spiritual stock that began shaping us 500 years ago and continues to shape us today. One might say that our DNA test, our Ancestry.com, is called "The Book of Confessions." Our affirmations of faith come from this DNA, and each Sunday, we affirm (claim and confess) who we are and what we believe in response to the Word of God. Why? Because humans are forgetful.

To illustrate our forgetfulness, let's look again at God's words to the Hebrews in Deuteronomy: Remember! Remember God's commandments in order to go out into the world and do God's work; fix those words on hearts and minds; tie them to doorposts; teach them to children; recite them morning and evening. Why? Because forgetting who the people were made them aimless and purposeless and sinful, choosing themselves over God. Because remembering who we are is essential to being the Church.

When God speaks through Isaiah to God's people in exile, he proclaims, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." Again, the emphasis is on remembering who they were—people of God—and who God was: their Lord. Danger comes when people put themselves in the center, where only God should be. Throughout scripture, God, Jesus Christ, the prophets, Paul, and others remind their followers that they come from a family, a past, with a history of living in a covenant relationship with God. When we know our past, we know ourselves better in the present.

So, who are we? We are a denomination that includes the Book of Confessions in its constitution. These confessions set the standards of our belief and what we are called to

do, and each confession is rooted in scripture. Because of that rootedness in the Word, no matter how old the confession is, it can and does speak to today.

Like reading a baby book or tracing our family lines, knowing who we are requires telling a family story, and family stories, as you know, differ with each person who tells them. Our family story is told from the side of Reformers, and it begins around 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 recommendations for the Roman Catholic Church to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. That action began what we call The Reformation, the split of the Catholic Church and the birth of the Protestant Church. In the midst of what Luther, a little known monk, saw as wrong in the eyes of God and contrary to scripture, he spoke out.

But some thought that Martin Luther didn't go far enough in calling the Church to reform itself. Some Reformers, including John Calvin in Switzerland, wanted the church to be based on the earliest examples found in Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles where there were no popes, bishops, or cardinals. And they wanted the church to be reflected in the lives of the members in order to impact the world. That is who we, Reformed Presbyterians, come from: John Calvin. From Calvin's teaching and theology were born several of our Confessions and our three Protestant hallmarks: *Grace* alone, *Faith* alone, and *Scripture* alone.

Our family story includes The Scots' Confession, written in 1560, the first confession published in English instead of Latin. It is known as the Charter of the Church of Scotland and of worldwide Presbyterianism. Thankfully, we've come a long way since John Knox and friends called the Catholic Church the Anti-Christ, and the Scots' Confession is certainly not gentle in its views of Catholicism, but we do take from it the definition of Church, or "kirk" as it is called in Scotland. The Church is visible and invisible, which means it includes all those living and present, those who have lived before us, and those who will live after us as believers. The Church is composed of the "priesthood of believers" where everyone is included in its ministry. The Church, we believe, is anywhere that "the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are rightly administered." That is what we believe.

Let's flip the page to The Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563, which was the first Reformed Confession to appear in America. It poses such questions as "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" with reassuring answers, like "*That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ.*" It also states our belief in infant baptism because infants and children are, as it confesses, "included in the covenant (of grace) and belong to the people of God." We don't call God into relationship at a certain age; God calls us into relationship before we can even understand it. This, we believe and we practice. It defines who we are.

Turn the page again. The Second Helvetic Confession, written in 1566, is the most influential in defining Presbyterian theology. The author speaks to the authority of scripture, to the definition of the church, to the meaning of the sacraments, and, specifically, to the fact that we are not the only chosen people of God. Instead of judging others and worrying about others' sins, we are advised "not to curiously inquire about these matters, but rather endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straight way." In other words, we are to get that log out of our own eye before we condemn others for the speck in theirs. This, we believe, but do not see much in practice in these current times.

The next Confession will be fairly familiar to those of you raised in the Presbyterian Church: The Westminster Confession, written in 1647. It includes the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the question and answer format used for over three hundred years in Sunday School to teach what Reformed Presbyterians believe and where we come from. Two main areas of belief include the Sovereignty of God---our belief that God is in charge and God has a purpose--and the authority and interpretation of the Scriptures, which are always to be interpreted in the light of love, not hate and fear. The Shorter Catechism includes the most well-known question: What is the chief end of Man? And the relational answer: "*to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*" This, we hopefully believe and do.

So our early family tree shows that our roots are held firmly by our belief in the Greater Church, the communion of saints, and our role in it, by our faith and comfort—not fear--in Jesus Christ; by our own personal relationship with God through Christ, and by comfort in knowing that God has a purpose and, being sovereign, God's purpose will come to pass, even when we cannot see it. In this story, our forefathers took pen and risked being condemned as heretics and being burned at the stake, or worse, because of their conviction that the Church could do better. These confessions, these affirmations of faith, weren't written only to educate us so that we might win at *Presbyterian Confessions Trivial Pursuit*, but also to transform us so that what we say we believe, we actually practice and live. But our story isn't done yet because our family line keeps growing.

Jump ahead 400 years from the Westminster Confession to the Barmen Declaration, to Nazi Germany, and to Hitler's insistence on having himself named head of the National German Church. Many Germans either remained silent or turned a blind eye to Hitler's words and actions. Many took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. As we know, the German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rise of Hitler as God's will for the German people, all of this contrary to the teachings of their Lord, and ours, Jesus Christ. But some in the church resisted, and that resistance is part of our story.

The authors of the Barmen Declaration, a handful of Reformers, again risking their very lives, wrote in no uncertain terms against the sin of nationalism (putting one's nation before God) and against the sin of idolatry (choosing to follow a human leader over Jesus Christ); instead, they wrote *for* proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Why? Because the people had forgotten. In regard to who is head of the church and of our lives, the Declaration states: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and trust and obey in life and in death." This, we say we believe. This, we need to hear again.

Our story then moves to 1967, to the United States. In the midst of racial tension and the Vietnam War, the Presbyterian Church felt convicted to restate its faith in the Confession of 1967. It is built around a single line of Scripture: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). It firmly addresses the church's role in the modern world and calls the church, then and now, to act faithfully (not remain silent) in the face of racial discrimination and other social problems, all with an eye toward reconciliation. It states simply and clearly that "the church confesses its faith when it bears a present witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ." This, we say we believe and are called to do.

But, being forgetful and sinful people, we are slow to work toward reconciliation, we are timid to speak up, and we often fail to live as examples of the grace of God. It took over one hundred years for the Northern Presbyterian Church and the Southern Presbyterian Church to reunite after the Civil War, but thankfully out of that reunion, the Brief Statement of Faith was born. That statement holds the common faith of both branches of the church and basically reaffirms our belief in the Trinity and in the real incarnation of Jesus Christ: God became man in Jesus to show us who God is. The statement also includes those people who had been excluded in former confessions and in the eyes of the Church, particularly women and Native Americans. It ends in a shout of triumph: "With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This, we say we believe.

Our most recent addition to the Book of Confessions is the Belhar Confession in 2017. It sprung from the Dutch Reformed Church in reaction to the harsh and unjust apartheid movement in S. Africa and is a call to unity, reconciliation, and justice, stating that "Unity is both a gift and an obligation for the church." What a relevant reminder of the task before us today in a society that is so dis-unified. As followers of Jesus Christ, we, as the church, are called to work through our differences, to come to the table together with mutual respect, and to work for justice, for all. This, we say we believe. The voices of the Barmen Declaration, the Confession of 1967, the Brief Statement, and the Belhar Confession, all rooted in scripture, are stark reminders of where we came from and where we need to go.

The other two confessions in our faith story are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, the ancient records of Christian belief. These two creeds are what all Christian churches believe and what make us "catholic." As Reformed Presbyterians, we don't claim to be the only Body of Christ, but a part of the entire Body of Christ, composed of Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, etc, and etc. Everyone, we believe, is included in this body.

Catholic. Reformed. Presbyterian. Christian. These descriptors are a part of who we are, the roots of our lineage. But just as in our confession of sin, our Affirmations of Faith really do not carry much weight if our words, what we say we believe, do not match how we live our lives in Christian community.

As we look back over our confessions, over our ancestry, we realize that our story is still being written and that our story still continues. The Church and our lives are still in need of reform, and what is apparent is that the world has been an upset, dark, and broken place for millennia. The world today needs what our confessions claim to be true.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called in our confessions to be the light that shines in that darkness. We are called to continue to bear the fruit of our historical roots by being an inclusive, loving, forgiving, reconciling and faithful people who work for justice, unity, and peace not just within the church but even more importantly without. We are called to honor Jesus Christ as the Head of our lives and of our Church and to mirror Jesus Christ. "The church confesses its faith when it bears a present witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ." This, we believe and this, we affirm together.