



# Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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**October 26, 2014**  
**Reformation Sunday**

Matthew 22:34-46

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

## **“Not Your Parents’ Church”**

Today is Reformation Sunday. The church at the time when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Cathedral at Whittenberg in 1517 was as corrupt as Youngstown in the 1950's. You could buy any sacrament for the right price. Now Luther never intended to found a new church, only to reform the church he loved and was devoted to. That church had forgotten the words Jesus spoke in today's gospel reading: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Phyllis Tickle, an Episcopal laywoman, writes in her book, “The Emergent Church” that about every five hundred years the church experiences a reformation. After the fall of Rome in the fifth century the church changed. It went underground with the monks and nuns then grew to encompass the known world, shining a bright light in an age of darkness. Then, around the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the church broke apart into two distinct entities, the Western Church of Rome and the Eastern Church of Constantinople, becoming what we know today as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Next came the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Tickle says that we are due for another upheaval in the church which she calls, “The Emergent Church.” This movement, unlike the split of the church into denominations in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, seeks to bring the denominations back to the center.

Tickle divides denominations into four basic categories. In the upper left hand corner you see those churches that are liturgical, who place a high emphasis on the sacraments; Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, and Lutheran. In the lower left corner you see what Tickle calls the renewalists, those churches that are free flowing with an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit; the Assembly of God Church and the Pentecostal churches. In the lower right corner are the conservative religions such as Baptist and Non-Denominational Churches. In the upper right hand corner are those churches whose emphasis is on social justice, the Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and Methodists.

In reality, tho, churches are never purely one type or another. There are places of overlap. For example, there are charismatic Catholics and Episcopalians that are both liturgical and renewalist, there are Baptists who are also dedicated to social justice, Pentecostals who embrace conservative theology, and Presbyterians who are conservative as well as Presbyterians who are liturgical.

Churches are moving closer to the center and in the center they are meeting. In our church we have a little of all quadrants. In fact, in many churches today you will find that people are taking the best from other traditions. We are certainly dedicated to social justice and missions here at PPC, but we integrate a little liturgy with our communion services, we have Bible studies where we look seriously at the word of God, and we are finding new ways to pray, meditate, and draw nearer to God.

The emergent church looks something like this. Denominational lines of demarcation overlap, blur, and are crossed in many different ways, while those who hold tightly to only one way of being church move into the margins and begin to shrink in membership. This is not your parents' church, no matter what your age.

In our Presbyterian Book of Order, in the section on foundations of the church, the confessions of the church going back to the Apostles' Creed are said to be “subordinate standards” which are “subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.” “...they are, nonetheless, standards.” “...the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, 'the church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God, in the power of the Spirit'. Reformed and always being reformed. We can never forget that the Spirit is still speaking to us. Think for a minute about what it means to be re formed.

To be re formed we must be pliable. Then we must be willing to let God be the one to remold us and reshape us into the church that God wants us to be. We are constantly being reformed to conform to God's vision of the church, not our own. We have a strong foundation that did not just spring up with Martin Luther and John Calvin. We have 1500 years before the Reformation of being church that we need to reclaim, taking the best from our heritage and letting go of the rest. We have rich traditions, liturgical, monastical, prayer forms, creeds, and music, that go back to days before the Reformation. Then we have those traditions that sprung up anew at the time of the Reformation; Creeds like the Westminster Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, and hymns like “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” And we have five hundred years of being reformed with additions such as The Confession of 1967 and the Declaration of Barmen that came out of the challenges of Nazi Germany, and the Brief Statement of Faith from 1983. We have lots of new hymns being written in the last hundred years that can be found in our new hymnal. The words of these hymns reflect new understandings of theology and the nature of Jesus Christ. They reflect new ways of being church.

We can have the new without losing the old. We can integrated our beloved traditions with new perspectives. As an example, we are going to sing a new hymn in

just a few minutes that was written for the 1979 National Meeting of United Presbyterian Women and set to an old, 19<sup>th</sup> century tune. The last verse of this hymn goes like this: “God, your word is still creating, calling us to life made new. Now reveal to us fresh vistas where there's work to dare and do. Keep us clear of all distortion. Polish us with loving care. Thus, new creatures in your image, we'll proclaim Christ everywhere.”

God's word is still creating. We are being called to look at the words of Jesus and hear them anew. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That is fundamental, foundational. If we only lived our lives with these two messages, we would know how to be church in any century. These commandments are timeless and all that we do as church must rest upon them. Love God. Love each other. Then find new ways to celebrate that love. Celebrate love with words of adoration, with music that lifts your heart to new heights, with creeds that are ancient, with prayers that restore our relationships. Let go of the little, petty stuff, and its all little, petty stuff, and embrace the love that has been here among us all along. It is a new day and a new way of being.