

“Like a Tree That’s Planted By the Water”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Reformation Sunday

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Psalm 1:1-3

Matthew 22:36-40

Who tells the stories in your family? Who sings the songs? Who makes the jokes? Who is the keeper of history? Who curates social media in a way that even far-away ones can feel connected through pictures and updates? Who can you always rely on to send a thank-you note, a Christmas card, a note just to show they are thinking about you? Who always reminds people of the rules? Who has made you swoon from a love letter, email, or text?

Rachel Held Evans, in her book, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, wrote, “Dignified or not, believable or not, ours is a God perpetually on bended knee, doing everything it takes to convince stubborn and petulant children that they are seen and loved. It is no more beneath God to speak to us using poetry, proverb, letters, and legend than it is for a mother to read storybooks to her daughter at bedtime. This is who God is. This is what God does.”

Our relationship with it may be complicated; it may be neglected or even a bit dusty; it may at times give more questions and answers; but it is a relationship that is ours. The Bible: a communication we share with Christians of every time and place, and also with God. 66 books, or maybe more if you’re counting the Apocrypha; 2 testaments; one God; and at least a thousand different perspectives: if we find our delight here, says the Psalmist, we will become “like a tree, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season.”

Like many of you who have been a bit extra this year about planting gardens, you know something about how to nurture and tend and grow and harvest what is there. Today the flowers you’re enjoying in worship are ones Mineko Yajima gathered for us from her sweet garden. We do that in the church too-- literally, with our children’s garden, which still has herbs if you want to come gather some, but also as we nurture people of all ages through the word.

About a month ago, a group of mostly third graders had a very special event at a church just a few blocks away from us in Leonia. They had been preparing for it for quite a while, and I believe the date had been changed due to the pandemic; but finally, 18 children and their parents gathered at St. John’s Roman Catholic church in Leonia for their First Communion. I know about this because several of my daughter’s friends took their first communion on that day.

As for most of the kids in our church, they have been receiving communion ever since they could talk-- and some even before that. We do communion education; when our kids are about

4th or 5th grade they will have a communion workshop, bake bread, and help to serve communion in our church, along with their parents. But we suspect there always remains an element of mystery in this Holy Communion, whether we are 3 years old, third grade, thirty, or eighty-three, so we don't draw a line for when one is "understanding enough" to receive communion. Jesus sets the table with a welcome for all who hunger and thirst.

But we do have the tradition of giving bibles to our third graders. These are full bibles-- not the shortened, storybook bible we give to babies and children when they are baptized. One of the reasons we give these then is that many of our children are getting to be good readers, so they are at a curious age where they can look and read for themselves, and start to discover the wisdom, adventure, and questions the bible offers. Another reason we give these bibles with such fanfare is that understanding the Word read and proclaimed is pretty central to who we are as Protestant, Presbyterian Christians.

Martin Luther and other church reformers swept into Christianity at a time when lots was changing. One technological change was that the printing press had been invented, which allowed the new ideas of the reformers to spread like wildfire. One of these key ideas was that each Christian should have the ability to read and interpret scripture for themselves. That meant a few things. First of all, the bible should be written in the language of the people. At the time, the bible was mostly written in Latin, which was a language understandable only to clergy, or to the wealthy, educated classes. Latin is not the original language of the bible, of course-- our Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and our New Testament was written in Greek.

I will say that Christianity has ancient roots beyond the Roman empire: in Egypt, for example, Christianity continued from the time the apostle Mark witnessed there, and worshiped and experienced the scripture in the Coptic language. Ethiopian Christians have studied the bible in Ge'ez, the ancient language of their culture, since around the year 500. So, outside of Western Europe, there have always been people reading the bible in their own languages.

But in the 1500's, reading was a skill most common people did not have, certainly not in Europe. That was about to change, though! The Printing Press had been invented in 1440, and that was a game changer! Books, which up to then had to be written by hand, all of the sudden could be quickly reproduced, which meant they also were more affordable. As more people could gain access to books, they learned how to read. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Anne Askew, and many others preached that individual believers should study and learn the scriptures for themselves, and not just rely on priests to have this special knowledge. Some risked their lives to give this witness, like Anne Askew, who was burned at the stake in England for her teachings and beliefs.

As much as Martin Luther pushed against the practices of the Roman Catholic church at the time, many of the changes he ushered forth were ones the Roman Catholic church eventually embraced. And, some ways that the Roman Catholic church remains distinct are things that I think we Presbyterians could learn from-- such as their rich sense of ritual, that engages the

body and the senses-- not only the mind and the heart-- in the experience of God. I have not lost the hope Jesus proclaimed long ago, "that all may be one."

Today, we still have debates in the church. They might be as minor as what color the carpet in the sanctuary should be, and they might be as big as wondering whose love should receive the blessing of marriage. Yesterday in our Bible Workshop, the third graders read Jesus' instruction, taken from the law and the prophets, that "you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind... and you must love your neighbor as yourself." We talked about the rule of love, and then they had to think about different scenarios, and put them to the test of love: what would loving God have us do? What would loving our neighbor has us do? I suspect that if we mess up in following the rules of scripture, we are better off erring on the side of love and inclusion, than on judgment and exclusion.

The truth is, we will most likely mess up on our journeys of faith. I will even let you in on a little secret. I sometimes get this fear that I will mess up the words of The Lord's Prayer when I am leading worship. You have to understand: I cannot even remember the time in my life before I had The Lord's Prayer memorized. It is etched onto my mind, my heart, my lips. I say it in my prayer life daily. But from time to time, when I am thinking about too many things at once while leading worship, I get thrown from my center, and I fear I may fumble the words of the prayer. It's really my fear, and not my lack of knowledge of the prayer, that causes this lapse of confidence. To be quite honest, it has actually happened before; I have stumbled over or even forgotten words of the prayer while leading worship -- but it has been in the context of the larger, gathered church, so when that happens, even if I fall silent for a word or two, I hear the unison voices from the pews and those just carry me through the next words, until I am drawn back into the spirit of that sacred prayer.

It's actually an amazing experience, to stumble, and then feel carried by the whole church. I become wrapped in these words that are so much bigger than me and my limitations. It is an experience of grace-- not based in my goodness, but a gift of generosity and love, a sign of the God we know through Jesus Christ.

I believe that when we turn to the last page of the bible, and then shut the book closed, God's voice is not done with us yet. God is writing still more chapters, through us and with us, because God still has good news for our world today. We are in the midst, perhaps, of another great reformation, which will change us and change the church. Can't you see it? In the 1500's, they had the printing press. Today we have facebook and zoom. The Holy Spirit has called us to adapt and change and grow in the face of enormous challenges, and if we approach these challenges with faith, consider the questions it throws at us, and continue to look at it through the laws of loving God and loving neighbor, I think there is hope for the church.

Witnessing 3rd graders Mexon, Ana Rebeca, Maesyn, Kai, and Evan over the weekend as they peered into their new bibles, looking for inspiration and guidance in this world we have left for them, I cannot help but be hopeful. Across generations we will carry one another in prayer,

even when we stumble, even into newness and change, and discover what the Spirit has in store for us.