

Reformation, Innovation, Evolution
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
October 27, 2013
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Joel 2.23-32;
Psalm 65;
2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18;
Luke 18.9-14

Friday night I attended the Room for All Conference in Grand Rapids. The keynote speaker was Justin Lee¹ who began by telling us some of his story. He grew up an evangelical in the southern Baptist church. His nickname in high school was “God boy” because he was always talking about God and theology. The way he put it was that he was “happy to tell everyone why they were wrong about everything....I knew that I knew everything there was to know.” He went on to tell us the rather painful journey that moved him from that place of zealous certainty to the place he finds himself today: still passionate in his convictions, still eager to share where the Spirit is moving him but engaging in those conversations with a very a different spirit by making the case for what is sometimes called “graceful engagement” in an effort to bring change and reform to the church we all love.

When I think about people who see themselves as protecting the truth – self-proclaimed reformers - I couldn’t help drawing parallels with Lee’s descriptions of the adolescent “God-boy” he once was. When you go back and read some of the rhetoric of the reformers whether Martin Luther or John Calvin you can see some of that energy - that same zealous protection of truth – that same certitude. And like the prophets of Israel, the reformers did not pull punches or mince words when confronting their opponents. Leanne VanDyk wrote a piece for us on Reformation Sunday in 2009 when we were celebrating the 500th Anniversary of John Calvin’s birth. We still use that piece in our new member classes today. John

¹ Justin Lee is the founder and executive director the Gay Christian Network and was the keynote speaker at the Making Room for All national conference October 24-26, 2013.

Calvin is the theological father of our reformed tradition and she reminded us that he was known by many as impatient and stubborn and argumentative at times referring to his intellectual opponents as “barking dogs” and “brute beasts.” This is not all there is to say about Calvin as Leanne pointed out in her piece. He was also tireless in his pastoral care for refugees and religious prisoners, at times brilliant in his theological reflections, engaged fully in civic life and the welfare of his city. When I compare my life to his I can sometimes feel like a slacker pastor.

Despite this robust engagement with life what often stands out from the movement of the reformation is the name that stays with us to this day: we are Protestants taking our name from the place where they stood in *protest* to the corruption they witnessed against God’s truth. They stood in the place of the prophets like Joel in our passage from today. The prophets like the reformers after them, stood in protest against the corruption they witnessed. Sometimes the truth was corrupted intentionally by leaders seeking personal gain. Sometimes the truth was corroded slowly by generations who wandered from the truth more than they actively stood in opposition to it. No matter how it happens, it seems that each new generation inevitably needs the work of re - formation. We still live by the credo of the Protestant Reformation: reformed and always being reformed.

I want to make the case today that our commitment to the reformation is a forward looking commitment to being a people who are continually in the language of James Allison “undergoing God².” As some of you know pastor Gordon is studying James Allison, a contemporary theologian, on his sabbatical. Every time I see Gordon I hear some new piece of Allison’s work that he is geeked about. On Friday night he pointed me to the introduction to Allison’s book *Undergoing God*. What Allison is articulating in this introduction is the very same thing the prophet Joel is pointing toward: which is that the way human beings are re-formed by the ongoing impact of God’s interaction with human life. We are changed when we go through something. It’s more than just apprehending some abstract truth

² James Allison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006). The concept of *undergoing God* is introduced on pg. 2-4.

from the past with our intellect. We change when something happens to us.

Let me know show you what I mean from the book of Joel. The people of Israel have experienced devastation in the form of locusts that have devoured and destroyed everything in their path. It's unclear whether this was a literal infestation of locusts or a metaphor for a particularly destructive period in Israel's life. Either way, we pick up the prophecy when the word of judgment against Israel's faithlessness turns toward hope and promise. The prophet experienced something profound during this time of suffering and he sees it as an opportunity for Israel's recommitment and reengagement with the God who is gracious and merciful who longs for their wellbeing and seeks to pour out blessing on them.

The first verses of our passage from today describe the abundance and goodness of creation. It's a vision of life as it should be: abundant rains, plentiful harvests, overflowing vats of wine and oil. It is a vision for human flourishing: every need provided with satisfaction in that provision and with hearts full of praise and wonder. The prophet points to this vision while the people sit in devastation. Everything around them is in ruins and the prophet redirects their attention from the ruins around them, the hunger and desperation that is inside of them, to the signs of hope and provision that are just beginning to emerge. And here is the crucial verse of the passage of the whole book in fact. "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other." The only hope they have to be re-formed and remade is to let God be at work in them -- in all of them. That's the really remarkable part of this prophecy; the recognition that God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh - young, old, male, female, slave, free. The only hope we have of experiencing life in all its fullness is if we are willing to recognize God in our midst. There is no OTHER. Only God.

After speaking with Gordon on Friday and reading again Allison's thesis as he lays it out in the introduction of his book, *Undergoing God*, I am hearing the end of verse 27 in a new way. I'm quite certain the original intention is to say there is no other... *god*. But I am hearing that ending

differently today. There is no OTHER. Can you hear the difference? No? Ok – I’ll tell you what I mean. I hear this verse as an invitation to drop our obsession with identifying who is to blame and who got us in this state and who is the “other” who needs our correction. “I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.”

There is only us and we are in this together. The game the Pharisee was playing in the gospel today – the game of comparison, competition, rivalry – is not the game that God would have us play. The game that God has given to us is a game of discovery to trace the movements of the Spirit in the unfolding of life and ongoing work of creation. As the prophet makes clear, that discovery is found in the dreams and visions given to young and old, male and female, powerful and disempowered. These are not rivals. These are together and only together the place where God dwells.

Perhaps we should see ourselves as reformed and always being reformed not because we know everything there is to know about everything and we need to protect the truth and correct all error. Maybe that quality of the reformation is best left in the past. Perhaps on this Reformation Sunday we can claim a slightly different rationale for why we are being reformed which is because creation is still happening. Life is continually unfolding, the world is evolving and because that is true, our place in that world and our understanding of this life is constantly evolving as well. And what we need among us as we seek to find our way are people skilled in helping us to discern the movement of God’s Spirit in the midst of this complexity of life.

I have found that some of the most skilled among us are the artists, the musicians, the poets. By the way, OT scholar Walter Brueggeman has claimed for some time that the power of the prophets is found the power of their poetry³. These skills are also found among the scientists who probe the edges of our current understanding and the innovators in our midst. They are the ones who are freed from the burdens of certitude and are open to the evolution of life; tracing the places where God’s Spirit is

³ I heard Brueggeman make this case at a lecture he gave at Western Theological Seminary a couple of years ago. But do not have any particular citation for this assertion.

leading us and pointing all of us toward the abundant life that is just beginning to emerge if we could have eyes to see it.

In this spirit of reformation I want to close this morning with a prayer offered in my clergy group this week from a book called *Prayers to an Evolutionary God* by William Clearly.

“Eternal Spirit, our parenting creator,
we are most ourselves when we live
with an inner spirit like yours:
extravagant, gratuitous, and innovative.
There seems no better reason for our life and existence
than to be instruments of your outgoing love and creativity.
We are each chosen,
raised into being by an act of divine goodness
and lavishness.
Give your creatures also that same attitude if you can.
We would make your spirit our own:
generous and inventive.
No spirituality could have a higher aim.
So be it.”