

Reform, Renew, Reflect
Thoughts on Reformation and Coming Back
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I was supposed to be at this table last weekend, but as many of you know Australia had something else in mind and I came home from my trip sick with a severe sinus and ear infection. I am doing much better thanks to rest and pharmaceuticals. It is good to be back and thank you for your thoughts and prayers.

This being reformation weekend in the life of the church calendar and my first weekend back following my renewal leave, I want to focus on three words: reform, renew, and reflect. Reform: To form again. Renew: To make new. Reflect: To look again.

To help us think about those words, I thought it would be fun to ask you, do you remember playing with playdough? How fun it was to see what you and your imagination could create? Can you remember your favorite color? There are a whole pallet of colors now, but what was your favorite when you were a kid? Do you remember that familiar texture or consistency and how it felt in your hands? Do you remember how with the warmth of your hands and the right amount of pressure, that lump of playdough transformed into something amazing, magical, and exciting?

To help you remember, I invite you to take the playdough you were given today out of its container. Yes, we are in church and yes we are worshiping with playdough...and it is o.k. Feel it. Squeeze it. Press it. Now do you remember?

Remember how a ball
became a pancake
became a taco
became a boat?

Or how a snake
became a cinnamon roll
became a square, a triangle, a rectangle and on and on and on...

AND YET did you notice or were you aware:

Is't it STILL THE SAME PLAYDOUGH?
SAME COLOR, TEXTURE, CONSISTENCY?
THE ESSENCE OF THE PLAYDOUGH REMAINS THE SAME.

I believe that is what it means to be reformed. To be formed again into something different but the same; perhaps something better, something more helpful, more true, more accessible, more meaningful, more timely, more empowering, and understanding, more whole or complete. I wonder how that translates to our faith? To our church? To God?

For our faith, doesn't it mean we are ever being shaped and molded by the presence and Spirit of God? For the church doesn't it mean to be more like Jesus? To live out a faith of reconciliation inside and outside our walls rooted in the grace of God, not the punishment, earn you way back kind of penance policy that the original catholic church once practiced?

That is what God revealed to Luther for the church at his time. Luther and others came to understand that it is by grace we are saved and not works; that we are loved not punished by God. They struggled with what the Pope and the Church Hierarchy had become and what they were doing in the name of Jesus - in the name of being Christian. They set out to reform the church - on the basis of Jesus' teaching and example and NOT on practices or procedures that gave the priests, the pope, and the organizational hierarchy supreme power.

And thus, the breakthrough called the protestant reformation was born.

Without it, we would not be the church we are. We would not be the body of believers we are today; practicing the faith, and living out our faith through the grace of Jesus the way that we are.

Throughout history, there have been major and minor movements of reform in nearly every aspect or branch of the church. In the slide you can see how it began long before our time. Judaism, Jesus, One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church, the Great Schism, and THEN Luther and the reformation. In other words, the playdough called church has gone through the process of reform time and time again.

On this reformation weekend, it is important to remember change is not new. It can be scary and uncertain and hard to fully understand, but it is nothing the church hasn't faced before. We know change happens. Change is not new. Yet we act surprised, stunned even, when it happens in our corner of the kingdom; to our family, our neighborhood, our church.

I know there are many in our church and community facing change, new direction, or transitions; being reformed and renewed in ways they both expected and did not expect. Ways they wanted and perhaps ways they did not want. I know there are a lot of questions, unknowns, and misinformation around what is happening in our United Methodist denomination right now and how we are going through our own time of reformation; being formed again and being made new.

The playdough is being reformed.

Let me assure you church - God is still God. In the midst of personal reformation and communal or congregational reforming and renewing, God is faithful. The essence of God does not change. The essence of what Jesus taught us to be as a church does not change. Our role is to be true to who we are and what we are doing as God's people right here where we are.

I am going to take a risk and ask you to consider this: In some ways, our focus as a church should always be on reform - on how God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is forming

us again and again and again into who and what we are to be based on scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. I believe we call that the process of pursuing holiness...striving toward perfection knowing only Christ was perfect.

Earlier this week, Andy and I shared ways we have felt and seen God breaking through here at Grace church and in our own lives. I believe breakthroughs are in fact a part of reform and renewal. I can't speak of God breaking through without sharing a bit about my renewal leave and God breaking in.

First of all, thank you!!

Thank you staff, parish relations, church staff, all your support and prayers while I was away. Truly a gift! A gift of time and space to: Rest. Restore. Reflect. Reform. And Renew.

As you can see from the many slides of places I visited and things I did, this renewal allowed me the space and experiences to reconnect with those activities and people that feed my heart, inspire my soul, and nurture my own spiritual growth.

Being in nature. Being with family. Being by myself. All ways that allowed a kind of reformation and renewal process to take place. All ways God was breaking IN to my own thoughts, feelings, questions, uncertainty, and wonderings, and breaking THROUGH with moments of insight, affirmation, healing, wholeness and spiritual growth.

One such moment was when I called my mom for her birthday. After several minutes of sharing and as we were wrapping up the conversation, she asked, "What one word would you use to describe your time away?"

Before I could really think, I heard myself respond with the word: FREEING!

At first I was surprised that that was the word. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. My time away gave me the space I needed to look at, evaluate, pray over, ponder, and let go of some things that were on my heart and mind - a lot has happened in my life over the past 5 - 6 years and it was freeing to honor, sort through, recognize, remember and release some of those thoughts and feelings.

It was good to be free from a demanding schedule. From a full calendar. From meeting after meeting. It was freeing to step away and gain some perspective on who I am, how I lead, and what my roles are while I walk this earth.

It also gave me the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be free from something in order to be free for something else. It gave me space to ask questions like: what do you need to be free from to be freed for? What do you need to be freed from in order to lead and serve as you are called? To see the next right step? To have room in your life for what you value most? To be the mom, daughter, pastor, friend, neighbor, and colleague that I am meant to be?

These are questions I think all of us can ask and reflect on as a part of the reforming and renewing process. It is when we are open to such questions that we are more aware of when, where and how God is breaking in and breaking through.

There is something else about playdough that translates to our reformation and renewing process. Remember how little pieces would fall awake, stick to the table, or get pushed aside? What did you do with them? Yes, you took the larger lump and dabbled it around the table, picking up the smaller pieces and making them one again with the whole. In some ways I felt like my renewal leave was a time to pick up those pieces of self that fell away or got lost along the way - some of the creative expressions that are a part of me.

I painted.

I wrote / journaled a lot.

I played my guitar again.

I read poetry.

I listened to music.

I drew and colored.

I took walks for the sole purpose of just walking...not exercising, de-stressing, or anything else - just walking.

In the midst of it all...

God broke in and got my attention. God, traveled 6,300 miles across the country with me, sat on the beach, walked the trails, and opened the creative spaces. The breakthrough came as a soul level reminder of how much I love what I do, where I serve, and the people I walk alongside - and that I am actually pretty good at it most of the time.

In the process of it all..

God broke in. Somewhere between driving along Hwy 1 on the California Coast and scuba diving in the blue green waters of the Great Barrier Reef, the breakthrough came as I reflected, prayed, and processed some really difficult and sad things in my life; around my brother's death, my divorce, family dynamics, again parents, how life doesn't always turn out how you think, how my life is changing once again with my youngest son graduating highschool this year, and just how incredibly beautiful and fragile life is and that being whole involves both pain and joy.

In the space of it all...

God broke in...with time. Time to work on house projects, landscaping, and cleaning out the garage. Time to do just ordinary house stuff rather than having to wait until my day off to do it all. Time to just be. Be busy. Be quiet. Be productive. Be creative. Be loud. Or be nothing. The breakthrough came as a realization of how tired I really was. How my own heart needed space to rest and heal. How my soul, as much as it loves what I do, it needed space to NOT carry the weight, pain, and sorrow related to my role as pastor.

Now, there is but one last thing I need to take care of before putting this back in your lap and hearts for contemplation. That is this rumor I heard and was asked about upon my return. Let it be known dear church, I am back and as far as I know, God and I have no plans of me leaving and moving back to Wyoming or disappearing into the Australian outback. :)

With that, I ask you to consider:

How does God break in and/or break through in your life? In the life of the church? In your family or work life? At school? In your relationships?

There is a large white poster board in the lobby with lots of colorful sticky notes on the table in front of it. You are invited to leave a message celebrating, recognizing, and thanking God for the ways, places, and times that you see or experience God breaking in and breaking through. I hope you will take a moment to share with the rest of us that we might celebrate and give thanks for all God is doing.

May we all be open to what it means to be formed again.

May we all live into the process of being made new.

May we all have the courage to look back and look again at what God is up to.

I wonder where God will show up next? Let's find out together.

I love you church.

Amen.