Reformation Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
October 25, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 22:34-40

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. And I am personally - delighted. Because, believe if or not, I have a long history of being irritating in the pulpit. I remember my first ministry contract. Before I was ordained I was hired to minister to a congregation for 10 months. A seminary friend of mine told me that they actually knew the congregation in question. My friend said, "they are all old. Don't challenge them. Just be predictable" My first Sunday there was - to the day - the 10th anniversary of 9/11, and the lectionary readings were about forgiveness. And I realized - I had to make a choice. I can be boring by ignoring reality. Or I can try to address the complexities of reality and help us all grow and learn and become more loving by dealing with reality head-on. And that can feel a bit irritating.

[image: bore or irritate]

I felt like those characters in the TV show "squid game" who had to make a choice.

But today being irritating in the pulpit is not even my fault. Because today is the celebration we call "Reformation Sunday". Which is our annual reminder that we are products of the Protestant Reformation from about 500 years ago. The fact that my favourite themes are thinking, changing, and growing is not the issue today. Because the Reformation was all about thinking, changing, and growing. Martin Luther was probably even more irritating than I am.

The Reformation happened because faithful priests felt the need for the church to make some changes. Changes were required so that the church would be more closely aligned with the ministry of Jesus.

There are two rules about preaching change. Rule 1 is that nobody ever wants change. And Rule 2 is that when you think people might want to talk about change …. Refer to Rule 1.

[image: super luther]

But 500 years ago, faithful Roman Catholic priests (including Martin Luther) felt the need for change. The reformers thought about their faith, church history, and the Bible. And they were brave enough to name issues and contradictions that they saw in how the church was doing things. And because of their great love for the church, they had the audacity to propose changing the church in order to make it better. They were not attacking the church. They wanted to make it better. They wanted to reform the church, not create a new one.

Change is tough of course. So the attempts to reform the church in the end split the church. Into the Roman Catholic Church, a number of Orthodox Churches, and (today) about 43,000 Protestant denominations. Splitting the church sounds perhaps like a bad thing. But the reformers felt the need to fix some of the underlying theology and practices of the church in their day.

[image: soothing image #3,142]

This is not unknown to us even in the modern church. Even in the United Church of Canada. Who here remembers the struggles in the United Church in the 1980's when we were deliberating whether or not homosexuals could be ordained into the ministry? Some congregations split over that. Some members left the United Church. Many friendships were torn asunder. And also, new relationships were formed. New partnerships emerged. By by standard, it was a turbulent time in the United Church. But the members of the 32nd General Council thought it was important to fix some of the underlying theology and practices of the church.

In the 1980's, the issue was removing barriers that had been preventing full participation in the church by homosexuals. That subject led to more general conversations about theology too. In our media, theology is usually presented as a left-vs-right issue. But things are a bit more interesting than that.

[image: that we may know each other]

A more general conversation about theology in the church is well-described in the introduction of a 2005 United Church of Canada document called, "That We May Know Each Other". The document itself is about relations between Christians and Muslims. But

the introduction outlines a way to look at different theological positions in a broader sense. Instead of presenting theology as a left-vs-right issue it offered four approaches to how we think of theology at all. And these approaches have some overlap. These approaches apply to many religions, not just to Christianity.

[image: Exclusivist Approach]

Exclusivist Approach:

- There is only one path to God. i.e. Christians are right.
- Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity.
- Christianity is legit. Other religions are really just superstitious nonsense.

[image: Inclusivist Approach]

Inclusivist Approach

- Essentially agree with exclusivists. Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity.
- However, “good” people who do not accept Jesus Christ as saviour may be admitted into the kingdom of God if God wants to accept them. (Eg. Ghandi).
- “Good” people can be like “adopted Christians” - without their knowledge.

[image: Pluralist Approach]

Pluralist Approach

- There are many paths to God.
- Jesus is the way for Christians, but not necessarily for others.
- One version of this is stating that all religions are the same.
- One version of this is that Christianity is perfect, and others are not so bad.
- No single religious experience can encompass an infinite God.

[image: Transformationist Approach]

Transformationist Approach

- Christianity has been evolving from day 1 as an expression of faith.
- No expression of faith is complete.
- Respectful dialog may lead to the transformation of all participants.
- Christian faith may be transformed by encounters with other people in ways that we cannot imagine.

And you are welcome here regardless of how you hold your own faith.

But there is no question that the church has evolved over time. 500 years ago, parts of the church evolved into what became the Protestant Church. 35 years ago the United Church evolved to allow homosexuals to become ordained into the ministry. 6 years ago I proposed in my book, *Evolving Christianity*, that the church needs to evolve once again to more effectively fight racism. The reformation that started 500 years ago never finished. It is - still - a work in progress. And yet I confess that for me, the word "reform" does not always go far enough.

[image: pottery]

When I hear the word "reform", the image that comes to my mind is working with pottery. We make changes, but we do not make material changes. We do not allow new ideas to enter the mix. We start with a lump of wet clay and we form that lump into a bowl or something. But it's still clay. We do not add new things or remove any impurities. We just change the shape. We re-form it.

[image: caterpillar and butterfly]

Whereas, when I hear the word "transform", the image that comes to my mind is like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. We make bigger changes. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly and grows wings. Which means that we gain new abilities. We used to only crawl, and now we can fly. How cool is that? When we transform we take in and take on new ideas, and we leave behind ideas that no longer hold meaning for us. We do not just take a new shape. We take on new life.

[image: ice skates]

Which is why our image for the week - the image that represents the Reformation - is a pair of ice skates. Did anyone figure out the connection between ice skates and the Reformation? Firstly, I see the Reformation as a type of transformation. And secondly, the transformation we see is not in the ice skates. The transformation is in the ice itself.

Just a very brief physics lesson. Don't worry. No calculus required.

When we put ice cubes into a glass of water, does the ice float or sink?

[image: ice cubes on water]

Why is that? Ice floats on water because ice is less dense than water. Which

means, if we take ice and apply enough pressure to it, the ice can turn into water.
[image: skating]

When you skate on ice, the skate blade is very thin so it exerts a huge amount of pressure on the ice. Enough pressure that the ice directly under the blade turns into a thin layer of water. And this layer of water is why you can skate so effortlessly.

Or to use the language of this sermon. Ice can be transformed into water which gives us new abilities, new hope. New life.
[image: progress not perfection]

The Protestant Reformation was a process that impacted the church in massive ways. But the whole idea of thinking about your faith and making changes as you mature is perhaps familiar to us all. Here's a concrete example.

Every person is on their own faith journey. But a very common subject that many United Church people have talked to me about - over the years - is the whole idea of hell. When I grew up I was taught that if we were not nice people, then when we died we would go to a place called hell that was very bad. Like flaming bad. The way to avoid hell was to be a good person. Oh, and also, to be Christian.

But for many people that I've spoken with, at some point in their life they had a co-worker, or a neighbour who was the kindest, most honest and loving person ever. They were someone you would trust with you own children. They were exceptional people. But they were not Christian. And at some point these people I spoke with realized that what they had learned growing up in church meant that their God would throw their beautiful, loving friend into burning hell. Forever. And for some people, that idea created some cognitive dissonance.

The whole idea of transformational faith is strongly connected with people reflecting on their beliefs, and their lives, and then sometimes needing to change their beliefs. Not because someone forces you to. But because of your own cognitive dissonance. As I said, everyone has their own faith journey. Sometimes the journey is cognitive. Sometimes the journey is emotional, or artistic, or musical, or something else entirely. But this transformational journey - which sometimes called "Progressive Theology" - is about becoming free from old ideas that are holding your faith back.

The first aspect of this transformation is becoming free from thoughts from your past that are limiting your faith. Or your ability to express or live our your faith.

But the second aspect is this. To realize that now that you have been freed from those thoughts, what have you been freed for? In other words, how would your family, your church, your community, know that you have been freed? How would your new freedom express itself in attitude or in action? Would you become a happier person? Would you become more open-minded? Would you start hanging out with people on the streets? In what way would other people know that you have been set free?

The Reformers thought about their faith and made changes in the church to bring that faith to life. And each of us are invited to do the same thing with our personal faith and life. I encourage you - if you ever have cognitive dissonance about your faith - reach out to me of course - but also, lean into that dissonance and see what you can learn. See how you can grow. See what new abilities you might discover. The point of faith is to make us better people. To become more fully human. More compassionate. To become more like Jesus. And sometimes, for that to happen fully, we need to make some changes. [image: Richard bach butterfly]

Which is I think the point of our story in Matthew today. Some Pharisees asked Jesus, "what is the greatest commandment"? And Jesus responded that there are two commandments. Love God. And love your neighbour as yourself. To me, there is a third commandment implied. Because if we are to love our neighbour as ourselves, we should therefore also love ourselves. In any case, the essential command is to …. love. And then, Jesus declares that love is the basis for all other laws and the teachings of the prophets.

Think about that for a minute. There are something like 613 laws in the Old Testament. Laws that range from prohibiting certain foods to prohibiting wearing mixed fabrics. And we have the 10 commandments. Jesus does not name any of those laws. Jesus goes to the core issue which is … love. Because if we truly love our neighbour we will not lie, or steal, or murder, or do those other things anyway. Love - if we actually bring it to life - would be enough.

The church has not always lived into that vision very well. The Crusades were evil. The colonization of North America was done without adequate regard for the

inhabitants already here on Turtle Island. We have not always lived into the vision of love that we hear from Jesus.

But we should thank those pioneers who did their best to drag the church into change. Into changes that worked to make the church more loving. Each attempt to change the church - including the Reformation - were never perfect and were never complete. But we have tried to bring the church more in line with the teachings of Jesus. And we continue to try to do that today. The Reformation continues today. That is true for the church. And it is true for each of us on our own journey of faith.

[image: two wolves]

I want to close with an Indigenous teaching which is often called "The Story of Two Wolves". Because this story touches on the personal dimension of faith.

An old Cherokee is teaching his granddaughter about life. The old Cherokee says to the girl, "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

One wolf is evil - he is full of anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, entitlement, and ego." He continued, "The other wolf is good - he is filled with joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The granddaughter thought about it for a minute and then asked her grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee replied, "The one that you feed."

Every single day you and I get to decide which of those wolves we will feed.

Feeding the wolf of negativity and scarcity will lead us to dark places. Feeding the wolf of positivity and abundance will lead us to new opportunities and new life.

The words of Jesus call us to love. We all know which wolf Jesus would feed.

Feed yourself well. Live into healing and hope. Live into new life.

Amen.