

“Our Family Values”  
Psalm 146  
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Reformation Sunday

The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

I was reading this week about the innovations Ford Motors is developing with its new leader at the helm, just as they’re rolling out their former star car, the Taurus, for the last time. I need not go into details about what went wrong with Ford, but I am struck by the fact that *every* organization – indeed, every organism – needs to renew itself or it will die. Today, on Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the innovative leadership that rolled out visionary changes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – and more importantly, we commit ourselves to renewal and vision for our church, for our time.

This summer our Session leaders determined to take us in a new direction, setting three priorities for our church: to pour our resources to proclaim the message of the gospel; to provide a community of spiritual nurture; and to promote God’s vision of justice. Committee leadership is now examining what this means for us in practical, on the ground ways. In the meantime, I’m devoting our sermon series this fall to the Session’s first priority: to strengthen us to proclaim the message of the gospel.

In my first sermon I proposed that we carry Christ’s message of the gospel less like a UPS driver carries a package, and more like our genes carry our family’s DNA. If that is true, then as Christ’s family we will bear tell-tale signs of family resemblances. We will carry common traits – Christly traits like compassion, selfless love, and grace. And we will bear common stories, core stories that shape our very identity, that have been passed down to us from others on our Christian family tree. Last week I invited you to inscribe on colorful leaves the names of your “Christian” family who passed on the story to you; the tree branch in the Narthex bears those names, and it is deeply moving. Today we will explore how we bear Christ’s message from generation to generation in

our values. It is appropriate that we explore this particular topic today: for the framers of the Reformation wanted most of all to call their church back to its core values.

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Every family has its values: aspirations about who we are, behaviors of which we would be ashamed, conviction about what we stand for. I've told the story before of Jim Lowery, who as a young man in the South in the 50s was told before every date by his Pappy, "Son, remember who you are." Jim understood exactly the family value being conveyed in those words: Behave decently towards the young woman or you will bring shame on the Lowery name.

Every family has its values. On my father's side of the family, education was next to godliness, which I've since discovered is a common Armenian value. On my mother's side of the family, cleanliness was next to godliness, which I understood as a child when I noticed my Grandpa Meyer's garage – there was not one speck of dust, grease or leaves in sight; you could have eaten off that floor. I confess that I have not upheld this value quite so well.

Every family has its values; so also our family of faith – values established by the head of our household. Our goal, the letter to the Ephesians tells us, is to mature into being like Christ – to "grow up in every way into Christ, who is the head." The most important "household rules" Jesus establishes are ones we all know: first, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. All other values flow from these.

These core values guide all of Christ's family. But not surprisingly, different branches of the family, at different times and places, manifest these values in different ways. On Christ's family tree, we Presbyterians are part of the Reformed tradition; specifically, we

trace our line through John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer in Geneva, Switzerland, and later through John Knox, who took Calvinism to his native Scotland. This strand of the family made its way across the pond and established itself in the colonies, producing many of the radicals behind the American Revolution. But that's another story.

What matters for today is how *we* carry the value of loving the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul, and to loving our neighbor as ourselves – how we carry the message of Christ's values into living values for today. There are so many values I could name: values like disciplined learning of God's Word, not just for clergy but for all; values like modesty that shuns ostentation; values like Calvin's trademark, conducting ourselves "decently and in order." But in the brevity of this time, let me quickly name three key values by which our family lives:

1. *Allegiance to the sovereignty of God*: "You shall love the Lord your God," Jesus said, and in the Reformed tradition we do not mean love in a mushy or a sentimental sense, but in reverence, gratitude, and full allegiance, because God alone is Lord. All of our other core values derive from this one. To love God means that we are free ...free not to do whatever we want, free not to live for our small, selfish agendas, but free to live towards God's sovereign will that is so much larger than we are. And God's will, Jesus tells us, begins with loving our neighbors as ourselves. This means not only that we seek God's will in matters of personal morality but also that we seek God's will for the common good in matters of corporate life, economic decisions, environmental policy. It also explains why we Presbyterians have always been involved not just in the spiritual but also the physical needs of the world, establishing hospitals and colleges wherever we've gone, including the one across the street from us here. And this is also why we Presbyterians have always been involved in politics – from Calvin's radically new vision of democracy in Geneva to the revolutionary framers of

America's constitution to those today who call for transparency and accountability and above all the advancement and protection of the powerless. Our highest allegiance is never for ourselves alone, or even for our country. Our highest allegiance is always to our sovereign God. As St. Paul says, "we do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; in life and in death we belong to God." We recognize ourselves as stewards of power, wealth, our gifts, our lives on God's behalf. As Rick Warren puts it, "It's not about you." It's about fulfilling God's agenda, which in the end is far more marvelous and satisfying than anything we ourselves could imagine. "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, ... who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; ... the Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow."

2. *Trust in the providence of God:* To love God does not mean assent to a list of fundamental beliefs, but rather, that fearless trust that "in life and in death, we belong to God." Once we recognize that God is truly sovereign then it makes all the sense in the world to fulfill the Psalmist's words: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs ... on that very day their plans perish." We may be tempted to trust in the might of empire, or the skill of our cleverness, or the leverage of our money, but in the end they are all, in the term Ecclesiastes uses, "vanity." None of it lasts; none of it provides sustainable security. We humans do not save ourselves and we are fools to believe in our own power. God is the only one who saves us, by grace alone, and God's everlasting arms are more than strong enough to lean on. Our anthem for today says it this way – "if thou but trust in God to

guide thee, and hope in Him through all thy days, He'll give thee strength whate'er betide thee, and bear thee through the evil ways. Who trusts in God's unchanging love builds on the rock that naught can move." We will not find this bedrock security in any other savior. But once we discover it in the Lord, we can face our internal battles and external threats with serenity – with a peace that passes understanding – with a trust that sets us free. This is the kind of trust in God's providence that carried St. Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela when they were in prison; for all of them knew that no human prison could bind them. They were already free in the deepest and most ultimate sense ... as long as they were free to serve their living God. Which leads us to ...

3. *The priesthood of all believers in service to God.* One of the most revolutionary values of the Reformation was the idea that all of the faithful are equally called to serve the Lord. The hierarchy of bishop, priest and common man was leveled. Nor was sacred work the sole purview of the clergy. The "secular" work of every individual was instead seen now as sacred work, and we all fulfill our "priestly calling" out in the midst of the world. In the Reformation the clergy's work shifted from performing the rites to "equipping the saints" to do their ministry – which is why John Calvin established a Lay Academy immediately next to the church in Geneva. Educating members to make their own biblically centered, theologically sound moral choices ... to be able to share their faith with confidence and conviction ... to represent Christ's values with integrity to the world: this was now the work of ministry; indeed, the work in which all the church shared. I think about what this means for our own particular branch of Christ's family: how corporate lawyers must weigh not only U.S. law but also privately reflect on God's own justice; how mothers and fathers must be devoted to their own children's well-bring,

but also take heart for God's children in places of far less abundance; how bankers and financiers must hold not only regulations into account, but also the impact of decisions on their "neighbors," known or unknown to them. I was deeply touched by a conversation I had last year with a banker who says that he wrestles with these questions all the time. God bless him for that; and God help us to share these struggles with each other, as we try our best to be faithful Christians in our daily lives. That is what being the priesthood of all believers means. It is not always easy; but it is such a remarkable privilege, and a sacred joy we share.

There is so much more that could be said today about Christ's values. I would welcome your perspective on these things. But in the meantime, as we continue to worship God today – in our stewardship and in our prayers, in our songs and in our silence – let us give thanks for this: that in our often murky and confusing world, we have received a clarity of values that will guide us still: to love the Lord our God, to love our neighbors as ourselves – to hold unwavering allegiance to God's sovereignty; to trust fearlessly in God's providence; and to serve as God's priestly people, for the love of God, and for the sake of God's beloved world. Amen.