

“Always Reforming”
Revelation 21:1-6 & Acts 11:1-18
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The book of Acts explains the birth and growth of the church following Jesus’ resurrection. A theme throughout is the movement and promptings of the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:8 retells the words of Jesus as he ascended to heaven. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The Holy Spirit is the motivating force, the impelling energy that reformed a small band of believers into passionate witnesses for Jesus.

The first twelve chapters describe Peter’s ministry. Jesus’ resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit reformed Peter from a cowardly denying disciple to a bold preacher and evangelist. Peter was a devout Jew. Circumcision and careful adherence to the food purity laws was an essential part of his faith. These traditions, based on scripture, had been taught and followed by generation after generation for approximately 2,000 years. Peter never ate any of the prohibited foods, faithfully following tradition.

Peter was praying, listening to God. Scripture explains, **Acts 11:5-10 “He saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.”** Peter was perplexed, shocked, confused, and totally bewildered. Does God really want him to do away with 2,000 years of tradition?

The previous day Cornelius, a Gentile Roman soldier, was praying and received a vision from God instructing him to invite Peter into his home. The people inviting Peter to visit Cornelius came right after Peter’s puzzling vision. Peter knew Cornelius was a Gentile Roman soldier. Gentiles were despised and Roman soldiers were hated for carrying out their oppressive orders. Peter vividly remembers the horror of watching the Roman soldiers crucify Jesus. Gentiles are uncircumcised and are unclean. Even to interact with a Gentile was at that time wrongly believed to be an abomination to God and would make Peter unclean. Peter was afraid for it was believed to be a sin to enter a Gentile’s home and eat their unclean food with them. Cornelius was also frightened. He knew he would be mocked for eating with a Jew and there was a good possibility he would be kicked out of the army. Both men were afraid for God was reforming them, asking them to undergo radical change, to tear down the walls of tradition, culture, and customs that divided them. Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house and suddenly the message he received in his prayer made sense. **Acts 10:28 states, “Peter said to them, ‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.’** Did you hear that? We should not call anyone profane or unclean. Do you have someone or some group of people you do not associate with, criticize or believe that they are somehow not as good or faithful as you? God says do not call anyone profane or unclean. Every person is a child of God. You should not be afraid to enter anyone’s home, to sit down and have a meal with them. Peter continues in verse 34 “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” Peter with the eyes of his heart reformed, enlightened, saw the Holy Spirit in Cornelius and the Gentiles so Peter, with the Jewish believers by his side, baptized them.

News of Peter and Cornelius’ visit quickly spread. **Acts 11:1-18. “Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance, I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not**

call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

So, what is in your sheet? What is it that God is asking you to let go of because it is a barrier to your relationship with another person? Is there a custom, mindset, or way of life that you are clinging to that walls you off from another? Are you letting the media or propaganda create in your heart fear or mistrust of a group of people? Do you ever feel that your behavior and lifestyle is somehow cleaner than another's? What about North Presbyterian Church do we have traditions, language, or something else that hinders people from being welcomed into our family of faith? Are we letting our preferred style of worship, music, and space divide us? Have you ever let yourself be distracted from your worship of God by another, perhaps how they worship or what they wear? Will we let our solutions to our budget deficit divide us? As Christians none of us are perfect, yet all of us are being reformed to perfection. God is constantly reforming each of us, reforming the cosmos and inviting us to live more and more like Jesus. Likewise, there is no perfect church, yet God is reforming every church. God is reforming all with forgiving, healing grace so all will be united in love, rejoice, and enjoy abundant life.

Peter accepted and believed this radical truth. God is constantly doing new things. God is constantly making the unclean clean. Reforming hate into love, division into unity, chaos into peace, sorrow into joy.

Peter's entire belief system, the way he worshiped, who he socialized with was changed by God reforming him to worship with Gentiles. God's grace is not finite, not limited to a few. God's grace is boundless, freely reforming, saving all. God is not weak, wimpy, only able to save a few. God is almighty, able to save all. God's love is not ineffective only able to reform a few people. God's love is perfect, eternal, abundant, extravagant reforming all and each person into a perfect, glorious person. For Peter this was both magnificent and disturbing. The Jewish laws were a part of him, they were passed down for generations, he grew up learning them from family, he has fond memories of practicing them with family and friends. They were central to every holiday celebration. They were a part of his identity, how he introduced himself to others. I am Peter a clean Jew. He dreamed of the temple and these precious Jewish traditions being passed on to future generations. His hope for a more loving world were intertwined with these traditions. God reformed Peter. God asked Peter to let the Jewish customs go that were a barrier to others enjoying God's grace. That alone was extremely difficult. In addition, Peter was called to help his family, friends, and fellow Jews let go of any custom that was a barrier to another. We are reformed and always being reformed. The church, and each of us has changed, and will always be changing. Change is unsettled, hard, difficult, fatiguing. How is God inviting us to change? How can we be more loving, more gracious, more joyful? How have you been hurt by the church? Is God reforming you to forgive and let it go? How have you hurt another at church? Is God reforming you to ask for forgiveness and grow in compassion. How is God reforming your frustrations, expectations and desires for the church?

God is always reforming. God is constantly at work, renewing, redeeming, transforming, changing every person, every church so grace will be experienced by all and all will know that they belong to God's family, all will know that God loves them. Each of us is called to share God's grace. The church is a family called to make God's grace tangible to all.

God is reforming us to grow beyond every barrier to joyful love for all. Jesus modeled this throughout his ministry. Jesus broke purity laws to minister to the outcast of society. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, touched the lepers, cared for children, eat dinner with sinners. Jesus taught outside the synagogue. Jesus forgave and healed outside the temple. Jesus broke through every social, economical and cultural barrier to love, forgive,

heal and care for people. Jesus reformed a focus on a purity of law to a purity of love that is reforming everyone into a loving person.

We are reformed and continually being reforming”. The tricky part is knowing what to reform and how to reform. Peter lived a three-part discernment process. First Peter prayed, spending ample time being still, listening to God. Second Peter recalled Jesus words and actions, which illumined and supported what he heard in his prayer. Third Peter confirms his perception of God’s message with other people. The Holy Spirit gave a similar message to Cornelius. The Jewish believers with Peter agreed that the Holy Spirit was with the Gentiles and supported the baptisms. Peter shared his story with the skeptic believers in Jerusalem and they affirmed the decision.

Our scripture challenges us to question everything that creates a barrier between us and another. It challenges us to keep asking God, how are you reforming each of us, reforming this church, reforming the world?

Revelations proclaims. **Revelation 21:1-6 NLT “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among God’s people! God will live with them, and they will be God’s people. God will be with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then God said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.” And God also said, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life.”**

What is your perception of the new earth? How can we reform more into that likeness today? How should North Presbyterian Church be reformed? The session hopes you will share your prayerful perspectives after worship today in Meisenheimer Hall. Amen