

“A Church in the Reformed Tradition”

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¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” . . .

^{22b} For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.
(Romans 1:16–17, 3:22b–28)

In my opinion, one of the most remarkable things about Larchmont Avenue Church is its founder. Emily Lindsley was a resident of Larchmont. Born three years before the Civil War began, she lived much of her life about two blocks away on Chatsworth Avenue. During the early years of the 20th Century, her hometown began to grow rapidly. And as the population grew, so did the need for new houses of worship. As the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, Emily saw a particular need for a particular kind of church. She reached out to men in the area, pastors in Rye and New Rochelle asking them to help, but no one would listen to her. After a while, she got tired of waiting for them to listen.

So, on May 17, 1914, Emily invited forty people to her home. Her pitch to them was very specific. She wanted to bring to Larchmont, and I quote, **“a church in the Reformed Tradition.”** In no time at all, that group had organized a regular Sunday School group, and soon after they formally organized themselves as a congregation in the Presbytery of Westchester. A short time after, the land on which we now sit was purchased, and -- just eighteen short months after that first meeting in Emily’s Chatsworth Avenue home – a structure that was affectionately called the “basement church” was completed on this site.

And now, nearly 110 years later, here we are, gathered on this same plot of land that is still dedicated to the worship and service of God. And, on this Reformation Sunday, it seems appropriate for us to think seriously about what Emily Lindsley meant when she said she hoped this would be “a church in the Reformed Tradition.” What did she mean by that? And what does that mean to us today?

A good place to start is with the opening scene of the 1971 movie version of the Broadway hit “Fiddler on the Roof.” Tevya the milkman, as he narrates the beginning of the film, points out the sound of a man playing a violin on a neighboring roof. “Here in our little village,” he says, “you might say that every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask,



Why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous? We stay because this is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: TRADITION!"¹

According to church historian Dr. John Leith, "tradition" in our context is defined as "the authoritative delivery" of the gospel of Jesus Christ "from believer to believer, from community to community, from generation to generation."² This has been happening since the very earliest days of covenant faith, when the Hebrews of the Old Testament passed the stories of the patriarchs and the mighty acts of God down from one generation to the next.³ It has been happening since the infancy of the early Christian church, with Paul handing on the faith he received from God to each church, bidding them to pass it on to others.⁴ Tradition is the transmission of God's Word, faith, and practice down through the ages.

But Emily Lindsley had something more particular in mind. She wanted this not just to be a church in the Christian tradition but "a church in the Reformed Tradition." She had a more precise branch of Christianity in mind, one that is distinct both in terms of history and theology.

Historically, our tradition comes out of the historical events of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe during the 16th Century, particularly in Switzerland, Strasbourg, Germany, and Scotland. It began as an attempt to reform and change certain beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic church that Christians like Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox had come to see as broken, misguided, and erroneous. These ideas caused rifts that exploded into impassioned and bloody conflicts that had significant religious, political, and military consequences. In the end, the revolution officially divided the Western church, and the protestors or "Protestants" who left the Catholic tradition eventually formed themselves into various denominations -- Moravians, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and others.

But we cannot stop there, because not all of these Protestant churches are part of the movement that eventually came to be known as the "Reformed Tradition." Our history may have begun with the Reformation, but it was our theology that really defined – and continues to define – our tradition. In the 1500's, Reformer John Calvin heroically tried to systematically describe and catalogue that theology in one master work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It filled four volumes and literally thousands of pages, so the best we can do this morning is to hit a few highlights. Here are a few:

1. The Reformed Tradition holds the words of scripture in very high esteem. One of the great slogans of the Protestant Reformation was "***sola scriptura***," a Latin phrase meaning "scripture alone." We consider the books of the Old and New Testaments to be the highest and best revelation of God. It is the church's primary source of authority, reigning supreme over ecclesiastical traditions and human opinion.⁵ We believe that everything we really need to know about God, and everything we really need to achieve salvation, is either expressly included or can be readily deduced from the Bible, which is "God's Word to us."

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDtabTufxao>

² John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 17.

³ See, e.g., Psalm 145:4.

⁴ See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:23.

⁵ https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/youngwomen/pdfs/nnpw_reformedtradition.pdf

2. We also believe that the only way we can be saved is through the grace and mercy of God. As human beings, we are irreparably broken by sin, and no matter how hard we try to be good, we can never achieve true righteousness. "*Sola gratia*," "by grace alone," can be saved.
3. We believe that the only way to receive this grace is by faith. As Paul tells us in Romans, good works or deeds cannot save us. We are justified by faith in God and Christ. Thus, our tradition seeks salvation "*sola fide*," "by faith alone."
4. The Reformed Tradition affirms the complete and total sovereignty of God. To quote the words of Reformer John Knox in the Scots Confession: "*We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust.*" God's mysteries are higher than we can ever reach, deeper than we can ever fathom, more powerful than we could ever imagine. The only way to confront this mystery is with humility, awe, and wonder.
5. And last but not least, we refer the special bond of our church, our congregation, and our people the "priesthood of all believers." In Christ, God comes near to each and every one of us, speaking individually to us face to face, as a friend speaks to a friend. But God also expects us to live out our faith in community. We share our sacraments, never celebrating them in private. We share our government, making decisions by mutual discernment and consensus. We share our faith, recognizing that the body of Christ is never just "me." It is always a "we."

These ideas are all important aspects of the Reformed Tradition, but they only begin to touch the surface of the deep and living well of our faith. This brings me to the final point I want to make: which concerns another vital characteristic of what it means to be "Reformed." In all times, and in all places, the church is called to look for, to listen for, and to be open to the call and leading of the Holy Spirit. That may seem a little odd, when we are talking about "tradition." As Dr. John Leith has observed, that word might seem to describe an relic of the past, something "old-fashioned, out of date, rigid and fixed."⁶ But the "Reformed Tradition" is nothing of the sort. To our way of thinking, the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, must always be ready, and always be willing, to adapt. Just like the finches that Charles Darwin observed on the Galapagos Islands, the church of Jesus Christ is designed to evolve as conditions change... evolve in ways that keep it relevant, keep it engaged, and keep it alive.

I've already mentioned a few Latin slogans this morning, but if you only remember one, remember this one: "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda...*" in English, "The church reformed, always to be reformed." What that means is that the church we are today is not the same church that met in Emily Lindsley's living room in 1914. Our faith is basically the same, our perception of God is pretty much the same, but we have come a long way, baby! This community has lived through two World Wars, one Great Depression and a few others that may not have been great but still left some scars. But the faith of this church has weathered every storm – storms in individual lives, storms in our community, storms in our world. Through it all, this congregation has adapted to changing conditions without losing the core principles of who we are and what we

⁶ Leith, at 28.

believe, and here we all are on this same patch of ground -- still together, still praying, still singing, still worshiping.

During that opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevya pauses midway through the song "Tradition" and speaks wistfully to the audience. "Because of our traditions," he says, "we've kept our balance for many, many years... Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do."

That is our experience as well. 109 years ago, Emily Lindsley looked out over her little village and thought that what it needed was a little tradition -- a pattern of belief, a framework for faith, a unique way of being together as the church. And all these years later, we are still at it.

Why, you may ask, are we still at it? We stay at it because the Reformed Tradition is our home. We stay at it because that tradition has helped us to keep our balance for many, many years. We stay at it because, thanks to this heritage of faith, every one of us knows who we are, and what God expects us to do.

Thanks be to God for this precious inheritance and this sacred calling. Amen.