

Reform Tradition
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53

Long-time member Gertrude Allen died last month. Among her personal effects was a letter dated April 1941, written to her by then- Fairmount pastor Dr. Frank Ferris, encouraging her to come home to worship the first Sunday in the new sanctuary. The letter continues: *...it is hard to say just when that will be, as certain factors enter into it which are beyond our control: for instance, the ability to get certain materials, like steel trusses, on which the government has established priorities...and...costs are high...*

As you may know, it was a whole year later before that service was held, on Palm Sunday 1942. It took Herculean efforts to secure the needed steel for construction as World War II ramped up. But Fairmount members and pastor held fast to a vision of a sanctuary that would inspire the worship and praise of Almighty God. We are the beneficiaries of their vision and the commitment and perseverance and love they gave to bring it to pass. We are profoundly grateful for their faith – the conviction of a thing not yet seen, but for which they invested time, talent and treasure.

So it has always been in the Christian faith. We worship an unseen God. Our highest values are not material but spiritual. We are pursuing a purpose that holds a great deal of mystery. We are called to follow a way that is not always obvious or well-marked, towards a destination hard to imagine. The gospel text for today is a collection of Jesus' short parables, images he offered to describe what is essentially indescribable, the Kingdom of God. I believe they provide a framework for thinking about a vision that will guide this church today, one that is rooted in tradition, yet which must be shaped and re-formed by the realities of the time in which we live and minister. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13, selected verses beginning at the 31st. [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53]

Four-hundred eighty-nine years ago this week, a young German university professor and priest strode to the castle church at

Wittenberg and nailed a placard upon the heavy oaken doors. Upon that placard he had written "Ninety-Five Theses" summarizing his arguments against theological doctrines and corrupted practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther considered his act a call for reform; his opponents found his ideas heretical. Though both sides sought reconciliation, within two years later Luther realized his perspective was irreparably at odds with church tradition, and he famously declared, "Here I stand, I can do no other." By 1521 he had been formally excommunicated.

Martin Luther did not set out to start a new church. In doing some research for this sermon, I came across several sources suggesting that to post one's perspectives on a church door was not the "in your face" protest one might think. Church doors were the medieval equivalent of the community bulletin board, so such action may have been his way of initiating public debate on the matter (He made sure church officials got a copy too). But the significance of his move cannot be underestimated, either. Such whole scale challenge to the authority of the Church was unprecedented. Built into the very heart of Reformed Protestantism is the acknowledgement that we see through a glass dimly. The institutional church does not have the whole picture; we don't "get it" perfectly; we do not make infallible pronouncements applicable to all times. From the seeds sown by Luther comes the affirmation *semper reformata; semper reformanda: the church, reformed, is always to be reformed.*

What I believe this means for the church today is that to discern a vision we must consider together the best of tradition while scanning the horizon for new signs and realities. We will hold on to timeless treasure, while letting go of worn-out practices and tired perspectives. We will add into the rich mix of what we have received the particular yeast of our gifts and insights, and then wait for its miraculous transformation into nourishing bread. We will plant small seeds, and....

...what? The fact is, Jesus' illustrations about the Kingdom of God involve willingness to risk. The philosopher got it right when he observed, "One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore." Change always results in a certain disorientation that can create profound anxiety, and nostalgia for "the way things used to be." A ship anchored in the harbor is

utterly safe, but what good is that, ultimately? That's not what ships are for!

Friends, the Kingdom of God is out there, far ahead of us. Its Ruler calls and the task of the church in every age is to listen and chart a course in that direction. In a Presbyterian Church we place this responsibility in the hands of leaders set apart for this role. Your Session and staff and pastor have prayerfully discerned God's call to grow spiritually and numerically. We have developed a framework—the broad outlines of an action plan we believe, by God's grace, will help us get there. The plan draws upon the very best of our tradition, while re-forming it in ways that reflect some of the changed realities of our time and place. For example, we reaffirm the centrality of worship—the heart of our mission, the church's unique act that gathers us and empowers everything else we do. At the same time, we acknowledge that people worship in a variety of ways, accompanied by different musical styles, hearing God's word in sermons and –gasp!—through other expressions, including electronic media. The framework affirms that caring connections among members is a major contributor to the health of the congregation. Yet we acknowledge that in a time when our lives are so full, work days so long, family time so precious, our ways and means of staying connected must be smarter and more creative. The framework emphasizes life-long Christian education and spiritual formation because if we don't know our tradition, how can we pass it on to the next generation? How can we hope to evaluate the millions of competing messages and values we're exposed to every day? How can we understand and respond to the challenges of living in an increasingly flattened global community—or as residents of the metropolitan area deemed to be the poorest in the nation---if we are not rooted in biblical faith? For 90 years, Fairmount Church has been a light in the Heights. Our core neighborhood's demographics have changed, and the framework's call for the formation of a Diversity Council to explore the implications of that for our mission. In developing this growth framework, the leadership of this church has tried to be faithful both to tradition and to the God who calls from tomorrow; we have tried to be like the scribe trained for the Kingdom of God who brings out of a treasure trove what is old and what is new.

And now we are asking for your help. In your bulletin today, you will find an insert headed "A Visioning Exercise." In the silence that

follows the sermon, I invite you to look into your mind and heart and discern what you see. What are the qualities and characteristics of Fairmount you value and want to preserve? What reforms should we make, to be a brighter light for you and for our community? (Luther suggested 95, but maybe you can keep it to five!) We will send this same exercise to the entire membership to get the broadest view. The session will then shape and reform the growth framework responsive to your perspectives and to the mysterious, powerful hand of God, from whom all true reformation finally comes.

In writing his encouraging letter to a young college woman, Dr. Ferris spoke honestly of the challenges facing Fairmount. He knew better than to describe reality through rose-colored glasses. Rather he witnessed to a vision seen only with the eyes of faith and concluded "*...one by one we are solving our problems and overcoming our difficulties.*" I have to think Gertrude saved that letter all those years because of the hope and courage it sparked in her. May God fill us with such vision to find courage to act and hope to persevere. Amen.

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