

“A Great Starting Point”  
Isaiah 41:26-42:7; James 1:22-27;  
Mark 1:4-11

January 11, 2015  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I have planned, over the next six weeks, a sermon series that looks at how the ministry of Jesus has developed in at least one strain of Christianity, and that is the one that we are in. I'm planning to follow some reformed theology and how it helps us understand Jesus' ministry. To go along with this sermon series, I will facilitate a discussion on Sunday evenings of the book *Always Being Reformed*, authored by Shirley Guthrie.

I have to say that when I was preparing the sermon, particularly this morning--as is my habit, I usually come in and work through it a little bit beforehand--I was wondering if I should completely toss what I had planned to do because of what was going on in our community. Yet, in a way it feels to me like it is in a moment of tragedy that we are taken up short and think about what is really important to us.

It feels to me like a season of grief. There are a number of things going on. We've had some deaths. We had a memorial service yesterday; we have these flowers here for Marmie. We have the death of baby Marianna. For me personally, we have the relapse of our friend Mary. And then to have this tragedy hit on top of that, to have deaths in our community through the violence of one person, it brings me up short. It makes me wonder what is really important to me.

I have to admit that I did ask Helen to stay in Walla Walla last night rather than driving home because of how important she is to me. It makes us think about what is really important to us, the love we share in our families and in this family, as a family of faith, the love we share for one another.

I was always going to talk about what was really important to us today, and it feels like tragedy helps us to focus on what is really important in a way that we might not be able to do under normal circumstances. You notice for me that family is really important and the love we share with one another as a family of faith is important. There are some things that undergird that and help us recognize that. Yet, oftentimes, as we walk through our lives in a normal way, it's hard to remember that.

Part of what I was thinking about for today was how oftentimes we begin to struggle with trying to think about where our faith is at and how it creates our identity or is relevant to our lives, and in our normal walk sometimes we can begin to just focus on that: the identity and relevance of faith. I'd like to think about with you some things that we can struggle with.

Shirley Guthrie, the man who wrote the book this sermon series is based on, is a theologian who suggests that there are some ways we tend to react. One way is to protect our identity as a faithful people. To do this, we sometimes draw lines and we begin to separate ourselves from one another because we want that identity to be so

important. And yet, in doing that, we can begin to fracture the very body that should be the body of Christ, and the love we share and the faith we want for us together. Drawing those lines is an easy way to gain a sense of where we are and gives us something to hold on to, but by doing that we can separate ourselves from the very people Christ calls us to love and care about. So we struggle with that. When we begin to draw lines and separate ourselves from others somehow it breaks the love that God calls us to.

There are other ways we react. If we get away from identity and begin to think more about relevance, we can reduce our faith to things we think are relevant to our culture or to a certain group of people. Sometimes we can reduce our faith to simply a set of values. Oftentimes on the left it seems to be social justice, and we can begin to lose the fullness of that faith. But it's not just that. We can make it family values or other kinds of values. But when we reduce our faith to one subset of values we begin to lose track of the fullness of God's grace.

Or we try to make it relevant by trying to find what is common between us all. Or we can try to make it relevant by saying that we know that it's about love, and we know that we all have differences, so it must be that it's about the differences. We can just accept all our differences, and yet we recognize that there are differences that we have a hard time accepting. So it's hard as we begin to wonder about our identity and the relevance to society.

What's incredible to me is that when I walk through life and try to work with those things, I can easily begin to forget the central core of what it's all about. There's nothing like hard times, nothing like a tragedy to take us to a place to remember what it's all about. Christmas tries to do that for us, and I would much rather have been able to just talk about the joy of that and the idea that God has come into our world in love and grace incarnate to walk among us, to be with us, to show us the fullness of God's love. That entry was an invitation for us to see this love. Sometimes it feels like I can take that entry and that gift for granted as I begin to focus on other things. A tragedy takes me back.

What is central to our faith?

Sometimes we Presbyterians are called people of the book because we hold up scripture as so important. It's the unique and authoritative Word of God. It is where God speaks to us so we always read scripture and recognize its importance. Sometimes people say a little tongue-in-cheek that we're people of the book because of some other books—*The Book of Confessions* and *The Book of Order*. If you have been Presbyterian a long time, you know what these are.

*The Book of Confessions*—people over time have confessed their faith and written it down and we have this book to go through and look at, and hear the witness of those who have gone before us and understand some of their guidance. If you come to the Sunday evening conversation, Shirley Guthrie will lead us into some of those

confessions and how they are important for understanding who we are as Biblical Christians.

Now, we often simply think of *The Book of Order* as the thing that defines how we govern ourselves, but I want to suggest that it starts in the same way that I was reminded of when I recognized and felt the weight of grief and tragedy over the last couple of days. It starts at what we need. It starts this way:

#### *F-1.01 GOD'S MISSION*

*The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation.*

*The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.*

That's how it starts. There's a lot in those two paragraphs that we can unpack and talk about together, but it also points to our beginning place—the good news of the Gospel. It is when I begin to struggle with our identity and what is relevant to the world around us that I am taken back to remember it is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It goes on, just one more paragraph:

*F-1.02. Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church's life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ's ongoing life and work.*

In the midst of everything it is important to me to remember the lordship of Jesus Christ and that he invites us to the table, to be his body, to know that our sustenance comes from God, our way of life is given by God, our hope for the future is in God. He forms us into a body that loves one another, that supports one another, that walks through the tragedies and the joys of life together because we have one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He invites us to the table and from the table into life. Amen.