



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“New Beginnings”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Genesis 6: 9-22; Acts 9: 1-12, 17-18

September 13, 2015

One of the pass-times that I have really enjoyed, in my life, is golfing. I’ve gotten away from it over the past few years, but I’m hoping that now that we are settling here I will be able to get back into it in the future. Now, don’t get me wrong – I’m no good. But, I love to get out there and enjoy the weather, the challenges, the fellowship, and everything else that goes along with it. But, I think one of the things I most enjoy about golf is that every 10-15 minutes, you start fresh.

One of the things that I most love about the game is that every hole is a new beginning – and it doesn’t make a lick of difference what you did five minutes earlier. It doesn’t matter whether I got a 3 or an 8 on the sixth hole – because as soon as I step onto the tee of the seventh hole I’m back to zero facing a new challenge, a new set of circumstances, and a new opportunity to do my best. One of the greatest things about the game of golf is that every single hole is a fresh start – a chance to build on your successes and a chance to improve on your shortfalls – because 5 minutes ago doesn’t matter anymore, what matters is the 400 yards that you’re staring at now. And, simply stated, I’m not sure there is a better metaphor out there for the life of faith, and the life of the church.

In addition to the stories of Noah and Paul that we heard just a few minutes ago, I want to bring one more passage to our attention this morning. This one may be familiar to some of you, and it comes from the eighteenth chapter of the prophesy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah writes:

“The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 ‘Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 6 ‘Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.’”

The simple reality is that God is constantly at work in our lives. No matter what has happened, is happening, or will be coming, God is perpetually seeking to reshape and reinvent us in ways that best serve our lives and faithfulness in the culture, society and circumstances in which we live. Now, whether or not we welcome and allow that work in our lives is another question for another time. Still, like a golfer walking up to that next hole, facing a new set of challenges and opportunities with a fresh start, God is constantly working in our lives to re-form us into the most vibrant, loving and faithful version of ourselves for the reality and circumstance that stands before us – and the truth is that it doesn't make a lick of difference what happened 5 minutes ago, because God is ceaselessly seeking to shape us for what is happening 5 minutes from now.

That's why we shared the stories of Noah and Paul earlier this morning. I really wanted to share those stories for the anecdotal purpose of reminding us that God's reformation in our lives is not, and never will be, contingent on what happened before. Noah, on the one hand, was doing everything right. "Noah was a righteous man," we read, "blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God." Noah was the good the guy. Noah was living the life he was supposed to be living – embracing the faithfulness he was supposed to be embracing. In the story of Genesis, it is due to this very faithfulness that Noah was chosen for the role for which he was chosen. Noah was everything a faithful person was supposed to be – but it didn't change that fact that God had a new chapter to unfold, a new role to unveil and a new purpose for Noah to fulfill. In other words, it didn't matter how gorgeous and spotless the pot was, God had a new form for Noah, and the shaping began.

On the flip side, we have Saul (who we later come to know as Paul). Saul was everything but the good guy. Saul was doing everything but living the life of a faithful follower. Saul was not only pushing away the work of God in his life, but was actively and forcefully subduing the work of God in the lives of those around him. Saul was not only rejecting Jesus in his life, he was seeking to arrest, and kill, those who were welcoming Jesus into their lives. Saul was everything he wasn't supposed to be – he was everything that the new followers of Jesus feared and the one from whom they hid in terror. But, it didn't change the fact that God had a new chapter to unfold, a new role to unveil and a new purpose for Saul to fulfill. In other words, it didn't matter how atrocious the lump of clay had become, God had a new form for Saul, and the shaping began.

The simple reality is that God is constantly at work in our lives. No matter what has happened, is happening, or will be coming, God is perpetually seeking to reshape and reinvent us in ways that best serve our lives and faithfulness in the culture, society and circumstances in which we live. And, as much as that is true for each and every one of us as individuals, it is every bit as true for our community of faith – for our church.

As some of you know, the focus of my studies when I was doing my doctoral work was Parish Revitalization and Transformation. It was a course of study that looked at change theory, issues of transition, church systems and all sorts of other dynamics that come into play into the perpetually evolving face of church life. A number of times, since I first enrolled in that program more than 10 years ago, I've been asked why I chose that particular course of study. And, my answer has always been the same – while not always put in this language, my answer has always been that I chose to focus on transformation in the life of the church because the

simple reality is that the wheel never stops spinning, and the potter never stops reshaping who we are, and how we can most faithfully and fruitfully minister to people in and outside of our doors.

This is a tremendous time in the life of our church – a profound moment of excitement and anticipation for what comes next. Because, today, we're standing at the tee of the next hole, looking at the beautiful tree-lined fairway in front of us, and we get to start anew as we move into this next chapter of opportunities and challenges that will come before us, because the reality is that what happened 5 minutes ago simply doesn't make a lick of difference for the fresh start and new course that is before us.

If you will allow me to risk running this metaphor into the ground, the reality is that there many, many things from previous holes that we lift up as great triumphs – a great legacy of ministry on which we get to build. And, there are also moments in which we wish things would have gone differently. And, as we take on the course in front of us, there will be beautiful shots 250 yards straight down the fairway, and others that we shank 75 yards into the woods. But, all the while, today and every day that we move forward, God will never stop reforming, reshaping, and re-enlivening us for the next chapter of service and ministry that he has in store for each and every one of us as individuals, and for our church as a whole.

Today, we celebrate a new beginning. But, really we celebrate far more than that. Because, today, we celebrate that not only is today a new beginning, but so is every day that we live, minister and serve. Because, the profound and glorious truth is that no matter what challenges we have faced, and what triumphs we have embraced, God is not now, nor will God ever be, done with you, or done with me. Today, we celebrate that there is no end to new beginnings, because no matter what has happened, the potter's wheel will never stop, and God will simply never cease in seeking to reshape us to a new and glorious form each and every day of our lives.