



**Sermon by: Rev. Teresa A. Larson**  
**Text: Mark 10:46-525**

**October 27, 2024**

### **The Church on the Way**

A rather striking image came across my email inbox this week from one of my favorite artists, Scott Erickson. The image<sup>1</sup>, titled *Everything Changes with Time*, is of an hourglass; in the top portion of the hourglass is a standard clipart rendering of a small church building, complete with a tall steeple and a cross on the top. The building sits on the bottom of the bowl of the hourglass' upper half and appears to be dissolving and turning into sand, with a steady stream of the church's remnants pooling at the bottom of the hourglass' lower half.

The artist's statement under the image says this: "If you love the form, you have everything to lose. If you love what gives it form, you're free to receive whatever it is turning into."

I'll read it again: "If you love the form, you have everything to lose. If you love what gives it form, you're free to receive whatever it is turning into."

The message seems clear: the church, as we know it, is changing and is running out of time. It was quite an image to see in this week leading up to Reformation Sunday.

When this day rolls around every year, we remember German monk Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the doors of All Saints Church in Wittenburg in 1517, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Luther was speaking out against the disconnect that he was seeing between what the church was proclaiming and how it was behaving. The legacy of that dissent lives on in this annual reminder that we do not worship the church; we, as the church, worship God alone.<sup>2</sup>

The church, therefore, is called to share the transforming love of God in times of crisis and change. "To be the church reformed, always reforming," as the saying goes.

The experience of the church and its place in society has changed over the last 500 years in its "reformed, always reforming" ways, and for the last several decades that reforming has been a troubling source of lament and distress. I won't go into the statistics about church attendance and relevance in 2024; but suffice it to say, they are as bleak and unsettling as the image of the church slipping through an hourglass.

To be clear: there's nothing wrong with loving the church in this form and lamenting its demise and decline. And, it is in holding so tightly to one way of being the church that gets

us into trouble and keep us from living into the ways that God is already transforming us and transforming the church to transform the world.

It's a good thing, then, that we have this day every year to return to the basics of what the church and our faith have always been about. To recenter ourselves on the unchanging truths of what the church is called to do in the face of a changing culture and world.

This reminds me of a story that author Morgan Housel used to open his book Same as Ever: A Guide to What Never Changes. Housel writes:

I once had lunch with a guy who's close to Warren Buffet. This guy, Jim, was driving around Omaha, Nebraska with Buffet in late 2009. The global economy was crippled at this point, and Omaha was no exception. Stores were closed, businesses were boarded up.

Jim said to Warren, "It's so bad right now. How does the economy ever bounce back from this?"

"Jim, do you know what the bestselling candy bar was in 1962?"

"No," Jim said.

"Snickers," Warren said. "And do you know what the best-selling candy bar is today?"

"No," Jim said.

"Snickers," Warren said.

Then silence. That was the end of the conversation.<sup>3</sup>

That's a nice, lighter sermon illustration next to Scott Ericson's image for this Reformation Sunday. It prompts us to ask the question, what changes and what doesn't? What are the Snickers bars of the Christian faith and of the church?

Today's Gospel reading is one of the Snickers bars. A crowd that had snowballed in size since the beginning of the Gospel encounters blind beggar Bartimaeus alongside the busy road. Bartimaeus, somehow, already knows something about who Jesus is and cries out for his mercy and he passes by. Despite the crowd's shushing, Jesus does indeed hear Bartimaeus, instructs the crowd to call Bartimaeus to him, and then restores his sight in the company of the crowd that had tried to silence him. They all then set out "on the way" – a common expression in Mark's Gospel to name both the literal way to where they are going next and the way of faithful discipleship that Jesus is teaching and showing to them.

Most readings of this story focus on Bartimaeus's trust in Christ and Christ's power to heal, let's instead zoom out and focus on the crowd's reaction and response to this whole scene. While they were telling Bartimaeus to be silent, clearly doing the un-Christian

thing, Jesus doesn't throw it back at them. He doesn't tell the crowd to be silent. Jesus tells them to go to Bartimaeus and call the blind beggar to him.

So there's another Snickers bar of the church-- the followers of Jesus have always been imperfect people who have many adventures in missing the point of what a life of following Jesus is all about. Oh, how easy it is to forget the work we are to do and the way that we are called to be!

But there's another Snickers bar, another unchanging truth about our faith and the church, and worthy of our attention on this Reformation Sunday: to be part of a community that follows Jesus means that we are also continuously pushed and challenged by Jesus and his teaching – and given a chance to do better, to do right.

The crowd does as Jesus tells them; to go get Bartimaeus, and to tell him, "Good news, take heart, Jesus is calling for you."

They then got to witness what happened – a man is restored and responds by joining them along the way. This was like a reset, a mini-Reformation Day many centuries before the actual Reformation took place, when Jesus did some course correction for his people.

It's as if he said, without having to say anything, "these kinds of exclusions to keep the community as you like it and find it more comfortable isn't what being part of *this* community is about. This community is about proclamation and redemption. The giving and receiving of mercy. Bearing witness to the healing work of God. Listening for the call to go to the stranger, the lost, the lonely, the outcast, and bringing them into this community that orients its life around transforming love and grace."

That is the king-sized Snickers bar of the church, whether this form of it is slipping through an hourglass or not. The unchanging work of a church reformed, always reforming is to be in community, centering our life together around Christ's death and resurrection and God's love and mercy in the face of our own brokenness, and bringing others into the life of the community, where all people can find a place of welcome and belonging.

It's in life together in Jesus Christ that we get a glimpse of the life that God intends for all creation, and invites us to join in it as well. In light of that truth, the image of the church as we know it sliding through an hourglass loses a bit of its power, grounding us in the truth of what, and who, gives the church its form.

We are free to rejoice in the gracious mercy of God, to stand in reverence of God's faithfulness to us, to savor the joyful privilege of being the people of God together on the way, with the unchanging promise and presence of Christ as our guide. In the baptisms

we celebrated today and in the one baptism we share together, we remember that we are given new life and brought into a covenant community of love that is called and equipped to bring about the transformation of the world by following Jesus Christ, together.

Good news, dear Church, take heart, God is calling you.

May we confidently take our place in the church on the way, faithfully following our Redeemer; reformed, and always reforming. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Erickson, Scott. *Everything Changes with Time*, 2024. <https://scotterickson.substack.com/p/everything-changes-with-time/>

<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Mission Agency. "Commemorating Reformation Sunday." <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/worship-reformationsunday/>

<sup>3</sup> Morgan Housel, Same as Ever: A Guide to What Never Changes, 2023, p. 3.