

Reformation Sunday – October 25, 2020

Introduction

I am proud to be a Lutheran. I was baptized at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Paul; I affirmed my baptismal covenant at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville; I was married and ordained at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in St. Paul. I was raised in a Lutheran household where my parents were also committed to their church. As an adult, I chose to continue my spiritual pilgrimage as a Lutheran because Luther's grace-centered theology seemed to best fit the witness of Scripture.

However, I have to admit that Reformation Sunday has always been difficult for me. My difficulty is not theological; but rather, sociological. Lutherans, as well as other denominations that consider themselves to be 'Reformation Churches' carry a sense of entitlement and privilege because they 'got it right' theologically. To follow this line of thought spurns nearly 1500 years of theological reflection that I believe was inspired the God's Holy Spirit. For me, the Reformation is about the re-emphasis of God's grace.

Remember that Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk and a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. One of his most profound insights [after much struggle] was that God ***graciously*** saves sinners from eternal condemnation and death. To answer the question, 'Who is a follower of Jesus?' we must begin with two familiar words, 'grace' and 'sin.' A good working definition of sin is 'anything that separates us from God.' In fact, sin is really a declaration of independence from God which makes us more concerned with ourselves than with God or each other. Being 'gods unto ourselves' leads us into a life threatening situation because we reject the God who alone can give life. Paul reminds the Roman congregation that 'the wages of sin are death.' In a more general sense, sin is more than just a specific acts against God. Sin involves our whole life and is really a rebellion against the Lordship of God – A denial that God is the Creator and we are God's creatures. Our inborn willingness to sin is often called our 'original sin.' The question are: 'How then shall we have life? How shall we be saved?'

The answer is so very simple that it is difficult: SALVATION IS ACCOMPLISHED BY GOD. We cannot bring it about by ourselves through rituals, sacrifice, or deeds. The good news of salvation is that God redeems us through his gracious love as manifested in the death of Jesus Christ. *Grace is God's love in action.* Through the grace of God, we are saved and restored to his fellowship. This gift of life is God's free gift . . . a gift offered through God's grace. Acceptance of God's gift of life [faith] is the assurance that our salvation is secured. The doctrine of justification (being made righteous before God) by grace through faith means (in the words of Paul), ' . . . we know that a person is put right

with God only through faith in Jesus Christ.’ In other words, our relationship with God is restored through God’s own action in Jesus – **Through grace alone. For me, this is a celebration of Reformation Sunday!**

In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve

Scripture Lesson – Jeremiah 31:31–34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Gospel – John 8.31-36

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

“Free to be . . .”

Let us pray. God of all mercies, forgive us for we are sinners. We come to you this day knowing that we have sinned against you and against our brothers and sisters. We have not been faithful in our discipleship. And daily, we have willingly given ourselves to evil. Gracious Lord, strip away all pretense from our soul. Send your Holy Spirit upon us to convince us of our sinfulness and lead us to repentance. God of life, bring us forth as new creations, born of water and sealed in faith with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

American history is fascinating to read. So much of who we are and how we understand our role in the world is influenced by what many call ‘*The Great American Experiment.*’ From the birth of our nation in 1776, American history has been shaped by ideas that social-historians call ‘*Manifest Destiny*’ or in more modern parlance, ‘*American Exceptionalism.*’ Many of these ideas continue to influence our political dialog today. But we must be careful. The stories of our national origins may well be accepted as conventional wisdom and taught in our public schools, *but they may not always factual.* Many originated from poems, stories that changed over time, or historical events that were embellished for patriotic reasons. Some examples:

- ***The Second Continental Congress proclaimed sovereignty with the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, but America was not free from Great Britain until the American Revolution was over and the Treaty of Paris was signed September 3, 1783.*** Until then, the United States was not formally recognized as an independent nation. Another common misconception is that the *Declaration of Independence* was signed on July 4th. Thomas Jefferson drafted the document between June 11 and June 28, 1776 and Congress approved the final version on July 4th, but the signing ceremony did not occur until August 2, 1776. ////
- ***A second story we have come to accept as fact: Americans commonly believe that seamstress Betsy Ross was asked by George Washington to help design and sew the first American flag.*** This patriotic myth has secured its place in children’s books, paintings, and school teachings. But in actuality, flag historians do not believe this tale to be true. The story of Betsy Ross and the flag did not appear until 94 years after the supposed event when her grandson William J. Canby presented the tale in a paper written for the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870. However, there is no historical evidence or documentation to support this account. The story became popular after it was widely published following the Civil War. Our healing nation embraced the patriotic tale.
- ***This one surprised me. Most Americans are taught that on April 18, 1775, Paul Revere rode through the streets from Boston to Lexington, Massachusetts yelling ‘The British are coming!’ to warn of the invading army.*** In fact, Revere never yelled ‘*The British are coming!*’ and it wouldn’t have made much sense if he had because most people in Massachusetts considered themselves to be British. Much of the well-known Paul Revere story is fable and appears to have been based on Longfellow’s poem ‘*Paul Revere’s Ride.*’ The poem is a very fictionalized account

of the famous ride. Nonetheless, the extremely popular text is often misinterpreted as truth.

- **One more for fun. George Washington suffered from dental problems throughout his life and had wooden false teeth.** General Washington lost his first tooth at age 22, and by the time he was inaugurated as president in 1789, he had only one natural tooth remaining. He eventually lost all of his teeth and owned many pairs of dentures in his lifetime. However, contrary to the popular legend, none of his dentures were made of wood. Forensic laser scans of Washington's dentures show that the sets were made from elephant and hippopotamus ivory, gold, lead, human teeth, and animal teeth — often those of horses and donkeys. They also fit poorly, distorting his mouth and speech, causing him much pain.

My point is this: Sometimes we have beliefs that are not entirely true. For nations, they are called 'myths of origin' that explain, in glowing terms, who we are and how we see ourselves in the world. We often use them to justify future actions and policies.

I believe that this also happens to you and me as we think about our lives and how we choose to live them. We often use them to justify what we say and do. In fact, I think that we live with **illusions of reality**. *The Revised Edition of the Random House Dictionary* defines an illusion in the following way: *a false mental image that may be a misinterpretation of a real appearance . . . something that deceives by producing a false impression.*

The last Sunday in October is commemorated as Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517, a young German priest and seminary teacher named Martin Luther challenged the illusions that shaped the Church's understanding of God's grace. By nailing his Ninety-Five Theses (or propositions for debate) on the church door for all to see in Wittenberg, Germany, Luther called into question the assumption that God's grace was dependent upon the worthiness of those who received it. Like the Apostle Paul and St. Augustine before him, Martin Luther argued powerfully that the grace of God in Jesus Christ can overcome every human sin except our illusion of self-righteousness.

Reformation Sunday is not the time to repeat the arguments of the sixteenth century and feel a certain smugness about the rightness of our cause. Such attitudes have been destructive for God's Church and have been hurtful to many people. The time for all that has passed because we have far more important things to do. The Church of God – be it Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox – has been called to bear witness to Jesus in an unbelieving world and to continue his ministry for the Kingdom. I think that Reformation Sunday stands as a reminder to the Church that the greatest impediment

to the Gospel is the illusion of our self-righteousness. In today's Gospel, that is exactly what happened to the people who followed Jesus.

The Evangelist John tells us that everyone was drawn to Jesus: the poor, the wealthy, the learned, the uneducated, the pious, and those of questionable morality. Interestingly, John tells us, 'they believed in him.' Why did they follow him?/ John doesn't really tell us. Perhaps they heard that he was a miracle worker with the power to heal the sick. Perhaps they were hungry for something new because the old ways of thinking about God no longer worked for them. Or perhaps, they sensed the presence of the Kingdom when Jesus was around. Whatever the case, they were drawn to Jesus and they hung upon his every word.

But Jesus was looking for something else; something beyond mere interest. Jesus wanted them to be his disciples. He moved from the theoretical to the practical. You might say that he moved the discipleship question from the intellect to the heart. Jesus wanted a commitment. **'IF YOU CONTINUE IN MY WORD, YOU ARE TRULY MY DISCIPLES, AND YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE.'**

We learn something about Jesus here. Above all else, he was a truth-teller. Jesus could not accept the illusion of convenient discipleship that his erstwhile disciples so easily professed. Jesus demanded something more; he demanded that they accept him as the source of all life. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus said, **'AS THE FATHER RAISES FROM THE DEAD AND GIVES LIFE, THE SON ALSO GIVES LIFE TO WHOM HE WILL . . . HE WHO HEARS MY WORD AND BELIEVES HIM WHO SENT ME, HAS ETERNAL LIFE; HE DOES NOT COME INTO JUDGEMENT, BUT HAS PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE.'** It is this truth alone that sets human beings free and guarantees life. But like most of us, the crowds were not so certain about making a commitment to this person who asked for so little, yet expected so much. I think that their response to it understandable – They were wary of him, so they invited him into their favorite illusion, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you can say, 'You will be made free?'"

Today, we smile when we look at their words from the perspective of history. At best it was wishful thinking or an illusion . . . At the worst, it was a lie. **What they said was patently false: Israel had often been under foreign rule.** Even as they spoke, the Romans were their masters. But I think that they meant something far more subtle. It seems to me that they were claiming they had never lost their spiritual freedom . . . That they were free to come before God on their own terms . . . That their personal righteousness and piety were a sufficient guarantee of their relationship with God.

When Jesus answers them, I think that he is speaking to a far larger audience. If he were to challenge us with the same question, I suspect that we would respond in much the same way. Most of us would argue for the same independence. We would argue that our spirituality is pure and pristine and that what's going on in our lives--our schedules, our priorities, and the like have no effect on our relationship with God. We would say, 'Free? . . . We are already free. We go to church . . . We bring our children to Sunday School . . . And we support the church's ministry with our money . . . What more does God want? Are these not signs of our discipleship and our commitment to God?'

Remember the definition of illusion: a false mental image that may be a misinterpretation of a real appearance . . . something that deceives by producing a false impression. Illusions seem like the real thing. Illusions deceive the senses; they appear to represent reality, but do not. Our version of freedom is not really freedom. I do not normally quote song lyrics, but I think that Janis Joplin got it right in her song, 'Me and Bobby McGee.' The refrain is: 'Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose . . . ' Like I said, in a very real sense, we are not free . . . We prisoners of our own brokenness. To truly claim our heritage as part of the Reformation Church, we must ask whether there is the same denial of reality in our lives.

The Scripture unmasks sin for what it is: an illusion that is an abomination to God. Moreover, sin ruptures our relationship with God and with each other. But the Bible even goes further: sin is so insidious that it corrupts our very being . . . It corrupts our ability to see ourselves as sinners. We think of sin as an act, rather than as a fundamental condition of being human. We trivialize sin as a series of offenses against God's Law; a laundry list, if you will, of misdeeds that must be avoided to secure our relationship with God. With such a definition of sin, it is inviting to think that we can set things right between God and us.

Jesus understands sin as something far more insidious. He sees sin as a manifestation of our enslavement to evil – an illusion of freedom. We think that we are free to choose between good and evil, and therefore, are good . . . Yet we cannot stop sinning. Sin permeates our very existence. It governs the way we think, the way we live, and even the way we worship God. Jesus recognizes that a life, alienated from God, has a way of perpetuating itself from day to day and from generation to generation. He knows that sin is a state of mind which leads us further and further away from God. Like the well-intended followers of Jesus, this illusion of self-sufficiency and freedom prevents us from seeing ourselves as we really are.

Our sin is that we claim by right what God gives through grace alone. Our sin is our fundamental perception of reality. To say 'we are free' is to accept an illusion that is patently false and will certainly lead to death.

But the Good News today is that our illusion is God's reality. The crosses in the front of our churches is not illusions, but the stark reality of human sin; a reality that brings death not only to Jesus but also to us. But the good news today is that the cross is empty. The even better news is that it is no illusion. We are free to claim the promise of our baptisms. **Free to be children of God.** Amen.