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Reformation Sunday • October 29, 2017

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 46:1-13 • Romans 3:19-28 • John 8:31-36

Five hundred years ago, so the story goes, Martin Luther (or one of his sleep-deprived grad students) went to big red the door of the Wittenberg Church, took out a hammer and a nail, and pounded in 95 Theses about the sale of indulgences. This is the moment that we in the Lutheran church have selected as the beginning of the Reformation and that we have built our commemorations around. You can mark a specific day on the calendar. And this is understandable. You can make a pilgrimage of sorts to the actual church where it all began. It's an underdog story with a nice made-for-the-movies feel to it.

But there's another moment, another starting point, that we could have chosen. It's called Luther's "Reformation Discovery." The date? Sometime between 1512 and 1517. The opponent? Unclear. The location? Unknown. (You can already see why we didn't choose this.) But Luther was getting ready to lecture on the book of Romans at the university where he taught. So he's going through verse by verse trying to understand the argument that St. Paul is making. And he didn't even make it out of the first chapter before he got stuck.

The problem was this sentence. This is chapter one, verse seventeen. "The justice of God is revealed through faith." And Luther read that and thought, Well, no. The justice of God is revealed through the Ten Commandments and the law. If you can't meet that standard, then you'll feel the justice of God. And instead of doing the practical thing, just choosing another book of the Bible to lecture on, Luther stayed with it.

And the thing that finally got him unstuck, the thing that set the wheels in motion for everything after, was a realization that the justice of God was Jesus Christ. That in Jesus Christ, God makes us just. That, as our Romans reading for today puts it, we are made just "by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ." Which means that we don't need to add anything to what Jesus did for us or do anything to complete it. That we are loved not because we are worthy of love but because, in Jesus Christ, God chooses to love us anyway. St. Paul writes that "the justice of God is revealed through faith" because faith gives us the eyes to see what has always been true about us. That in Jesus Christ we are loved, cared for, and forgiven by God.

Like many so-called discoveries, Luther wasn't the first person to discover this. Luther didn't discover God's grace. It's sitting right there in Romans. But he did discover it for himself. The re-discovery of the gospel for his own time.

At the end of his life, Luther remembered what this "Reformation discovery" felt like. About what it was like when he realized that in Jesus Christ, God loved him anyway. He writes, "All at once I had the feeling of being born again and immediately entering into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately the whole of Scripture shone in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings... the power of God, by which God makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise... I would exalt this sweetest word of mine 'justice of God' with as much love as before I had hated it with hate." The truth shall make you free, indeed.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus invites a group of believers to that same experience that Luther would have fifteen hundred years later. "If you continue in my word," he tells them, "you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And yet this isn't how most of us feel about truth. Too often, when we hear language about God and truth, we assume that the truth is about doctrine or the teaching of the church. We assume that the truth is our tradition or our denomination or our way of doing things. And if that's the case, our job is to

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protect it. Batten down the hatches. Build a mighty fortress. If the truth is a doctrine or a teaching or a tradition, then the truth isn't freeing at all. Because we are always anxious about whether we are doing a good enough job preserving it.

But the truth that Jesus is talking about isn't doctrine. The truth isn't our tradition. The truth is Jesus Christ. As Jesus puts it elsewhere in John's gospel, "I am the way and the truth and the light." To be invited to "continue in my word" and "know the truth" is an invitation to be in relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Not in relationship with a creed. Not in relationship with a confession of faith. Not in relationship with a tradition or a denomination. But in relationship with God. That's why we don't say that we're "baptized Lutheran" or "baptized Catholic" or "baptized Presbyterian." Because we were baptized into something much better than that. We were baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, as Jesus says in today's gospel, that "truth shall make you free." Only that truth, the truth that is Jesus Christ can make you free.

When Jesus gives the crowd this invitation of new life and liberation, it doesn't exactly go over well. When Jesus promises to make them free, they reply, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." Thanks, but no thanks, they say. We are Israelites, we've never been enslaved, so we don't have any use for this liberation you're talking about. You have to wonder what kind of confused, "are you kidding me?" look Jesus must have shot back. The Israelites, the descendants of Abraham were enslaved. The origin story of the Jewish people is all about how they were enslaved in Egypt and God brought them out through the Red Sea and brought them into their covenant relationship. Even worse, this story takes place at what was called the Festival of the Booths, a festival when Jews like Jesus went to Jerusalem to remember how God led them out of slavery to the promised land. Surrounded by reminders of how God led them out of slavery, the crowd replies, "We are descendants of Abraham, and we have never been slaves to anyone."

It's tempting to deride the crowd for their lack of understanding. Their self-righteousness has crowded out any memory of what forms their identity as a people. Tradition has kept them from seeing that their relationship with God is still a living, breathing thing. But we shouldn't judge them too harshly. Because we too, surrounded by red vestments and Luther roses, might rebuff Jesus's invitation, saying, "We are descendants of Martin Luther and have never been slaves to anyone." Tradition is good. Tradition is necessary. Churches that say they don't have traditions just mean they don't have them written down. But, lest we end up like the crowd in today's gospel, we need to ask what our tradition does. Does our tradition help us invite people into relationship with God? Does it give us language and images that help us grow in witness to Jesus Christ? Or is our tradition something that merely points to itself? A historical curiosity to be kept under glass? Or even worse, something we use to make us feel superior to others?

It didn't take long for Reformation Day to become the latter. Reformation Day was already being celebrated a few short years after the 95 Theses went viral. And a day to give thanks for how God loves us unconditionally became a day to celebrate the reformers, which really meant it was a day to criticize the Catholic Church. At the one hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutheran and Reformed churches put aside their differences to hold a joint commemoration, a commemoration which consisted mostly of issuing even more polemics against the Catholic Church. And this is still how the Reformation Sunday is commemorated in many of our churches. As a day for twenty first century Lutherans to pat ourselves on the back for being so much more advanced than sixteenth century Catholics.

But a lot has changed since those heady days at Wittenberg. We are living through and doing ministry in a time of incredible change. A situation equally if not more unpredictable than what

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those reformers lived through five hundred years ago. Institutions, especially religious institutions, have less influence than they once enjoyed. Denominational affiliation no longer has the pull it once did. The Christian faith and the Lutheran expression of it are becoming more global and less European. And while we live in a more globalized world, our filter bubbles make it feel smaller and smaller. Our civic discourse has been wrecked by our worst instincts. The days of dog whistle politics often feel quaint by comparison. What does a “Reformation discovery” look like for us today?

If there is something we can learn from the reformers for our own context, perhaps it's this. That we offer our best witness to the world not when we focus on developing perfect answers to questions no one is asking, but when we go after the questions that are left unanswered. To ask, “Who is Jesus Christ for you today? What do we need to be freed from? What do we need to be freed for?”

The red vestments that we are using today are reminiscent of the fire that fell on the church at Pentecost. Fire that was illuminating. Inviting. Powerful. The composer Gustav Mahler once remarked that tradition is “not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” Preserving that fire for the next five hundred years is no small task. It means nurturing a Lutheran tradition that is innovative enough to speak to people’s experiences, open enough to welcome all God’s people, and bold enough to proclaim a message that’s worth hearing. An undertaking no lighter than the one begun five hundred years ago. But that’s what God calls us to today and who Jesus promises to be for us in today’s gospel reading. “If the Son makes you free,” Jesus says, “you will be free indeed.” Free to “help and support [our neighbors] in all of life’s needs.” Free to “fear, love, and trust God above all things.” Free to live as a people of God. Free to help others re-discover that in Jesus Christ, God loves them anyway. That is most certainly true.

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