

REFORMATION SUNDAY | OCTOBER 31, 2021

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 46 | ROMANS 3:19-28 | JOHN 8:31-36

Few people take note of what's in *Terrae Incognitae*, a peer-reviewed academic journal of cartography. Until this past summer anyway, when an article by the Italian researcher Paolo Chiesa got the attention of the *Times* of London, *The Economist*, and the New York *Post*, which is where I get all my cartography news from.

Chiesa's article was about an obscure history of the world written in the year 1340 by an Italian monk in the city of Genoa.¹ That history was rather pedestrian except for one shocking aside. This monk mentioned that there was a land west of Greenland that was filled with "green trees, animals and a great quantity of birds." This monk was talking about what we now call the Americas. And even though he didn't get everything right—he thought it was inhabited by giants—he still knew it was there.

So by the time Columbus "discovered" the Americas, not only did the people who lived there know it was there. And not only were there other Europeans who knew it was there. There were even other Italians, including a guy from his hometown, who knew it was there.

Sometimes discoveries turn out to just be dramatic late arrivals. We often like to think that we can discover a new place, a new idea, a new experience where no one has been before, but when we show up, we realize it's already a full house. Maybe you've had that experience where you're at a party, and you tell people about a new author, a new band, a new podcast you just discovered. And these people give you a funny look and say, "We know about this." Maybe it's not really new, you admit, but it's new *to me*. But it's not quite the same.

The importance of discovery is deeply embedded in our story of the Lutheran Reformation. Most popular retellings of the Lutheran Reformation go something like this. Luther was crushed by his guilt over his inability to gain his own salvation. To use the language of today's reading from Romans, he was unable to achieve "the righteousness of God." He could never meet the standard God set. And then he had this moment of moment of insight. He realized that the righteousness of God didn't mean the righteousness that *belongs* to God. It meant the righteousness *given* by God. Salvation isn't something you achieve from your own efforts, it's a gift that comes from outside ourselves. That's what sets the whole thing off. In Luther scholarship, this is called the "Reformation discovery."²

And you can already hear the refrain coming. *We know about this*. And sure enough, part of the reason Luther felt so confident in his discovery was because he looked up what

¹ "A Monk in 14th-Century Italy Wrote about the Americas," *The Economist*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2021/09/25/a-monk-in-14th-century-italy-wrote-about-the-americas>.

² David Bagchi, David C. Steinmetz, and Bagchi David, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 42.

St. Augustine, the greatest theologian of all, had to say. And it turns out St. Augustine had come to a similar realization over a thousand years earlier.

So the “Reformation discovery” wasn’t totally new after all. But it was new *to him*. And when you’re talking about discovering a new place or a new author or a new restaurant, that doesn’t really count for much. But when you’re talking about the gospel, it makes all the difference.

Since 2018, we’ve used Reformation Day to take a little dive into *From Conflict to Communion*. This was the joint Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical document put out in 2017 to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. And it includes five ecumenical imperatives to guide our work. And this year we’re up to number four. “The fourth imperative: Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.” In most contexts, “rediscovery” is an oxymoron. But when we talk about the gospel, it’s okay. And more than that, it’s imperative. It’s at the heart of who we are. Why is that? Why do we need to rediscover the gospel?

Well, today’s gospel reading lays out the problem pretty well. In this story, Jesus tells a group of his followers that he will tell them the truth, and the truth will make them free. You would expect this teaching to be enthusiastically accepted. *Truth, freedom, love it, great*. But no. These disciples reply, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.”

As astute readers, you should have alarm bells going off already. After all, the Israelites, descendants of Abraham, were enslaved in Egypt. But if you ignore that then, yea, sure. And there was the time when they were sacked by the Babylonians, and were deported from their homes. And they didn’t have freedom then. But if you ignore that, too, then, yea. And they are technically living under Roman occupation and don’t have as much freedom as they want. But if you leave that part out...

The story they tell themselves has turned into a myth. And myths don’t come down from the sky fully formed. No one would ever believe them if they did. Myths start as little bits and pieces that get embedded in our lives.

There are all sorts of messages that fill our lives, that give us our sense of meaning and worth and purpose, or lack thereof. And they’re so common, we just take them for granted. We’ve seen a very concrete example of that recently with revelations about how social media companies, facebook in particular, have been profiting off people’s anxiety about their bodies and fear of multiracial democracy. They don’t start out by showing you myths, but they get there bit by bit. Other people are getting something they don’t deserve. You’re not worthy of love. You’re one of the insiders who get it.

And when you get acclimated to those different stories, those different narratives, you can end up a long way from where you started without ever having to make a big jump. In fact, reading today’s gospel, it’s easy to imagine the disciples’ belief that they’ve always been free seemingly perfectly reasonable until they say it out loud.

So we need to rediscover the gospel not because God's grace is contingent or we're in danger of losing it, but because we cover it up. We get sidetracked. We get distracted from what's really true and what's actually important. We mistake something being easy to see or easy to believe for something being true. In the case of these Israelites, the stories of God's liberation from slavery and redemption from exile have been covered up with their pride. In Luther's case, the gospel got crowded out because—irony of ironies—people were too focused on the church. For many of us the gospel gets crowded out because it doesn't seem immediately useful.

This is part of the reason why we gather for worship more than once. Because life keeps happening. The messages keep on coming. The myths of consumerism and exceptionalism and narrow self-interest keep on making headway. And so God gathers us again and again and again and again. Not because we're in danger of losing God's grace, but because we need to hear what God says about us. We need to be fed at Christ's table. And we need to be sent into the world with a resurrection point of view.

Worship is about praising God and expressing gratitude, sure, but it's also about creating space for God to work on us. It's about clearing away, "pruning" to use St. John's image, some of those self-serving myths and stories and getting to the real heart of the matter. In Jesus, God loves us so that we can love others...

We know about this. Of course we do. It's what St. Paul said. It's what Augustine said. It's what Luther said. It's what I try to say every week. But it's always new. Not because the message is new but because the context is new. This assembly is new. The world we serve is new. Your sense of who you are is new. And so there is always something new to discover.

In thesis one of his famous Ninety-Five Theses, Luther put it this way. That the entire Christian life is one of repentance. In other words, faith is dynamic. It isn't something you acquire once. It's not like a degree that you get and then stick up on the shelf. Or a passport you get and stick in a drawer until you need it. It's something God gives us again and again and again. It's never something we possess. It's always something we rediscover.

Because in Christ, God isn't simply God in theory or God in principle but God *for you*. Every time we gather together around font, word, and table, God offers us acceptance, integrity, and recognition, and we are told who we really are. The entire Christian life is one of rediscovery. It isn't new. But it's new *to you*. And that's the whole point.

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