

Reformation Sunday
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 8:31-36

The holy gospel, according to Saint John, the eighth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

³¹Jesus 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

It is rare air we breathe today, standing to mark a moment in time like this.
500 years ago, the church shifted on her axis a little bit,
the great ark that bears God’s people safely on changed course
by the little rudder of a brilliant, searching, cantankerous,
flawed yet faithful man.

It is quite a task to find words fitting for this day.

Although, it was 500 years ago, a few days from now, still
at an exact time of day, that we don’t even really know,
and it would have been at Greenwich Mean Time plus an hour.

Maybe this moment isn’t so rare,
or maybe this and every moment like it is as rare as we perceive it to be.
How much does it matter what second the hammer met the nail,

or if it happened exactly that way at all?

As we stand looking back at 1517 from this far distant,
I find myself wondering most what looks different
from that many years past.

What details are no longer in focus?

I think even the physical survival of our hero, so to speak,
(good heavens would he hate us to be calling him that, though).

The fact that Luther survived to live a full life
might allow us to forget the many who gave their lives
into this reforming of the world.

Remembering that even life was uncertain for Luther and so many others,
I find myself wondering so much what those men and women
really felt and thought in those days.

I imagine it must have been exciting
to feel so strongly convicted by a new movement.

I imagine it must have even been exciting
to feel the power structures shift like tectonic plates under their feet,
both in the fear and anger of a challenge
to the very way the world's machinery was built.

I also imagine it must have been frightening.

Even change that is right and unambiguously good is unsettling.
How much harder must it have been to be a part of a change
that was remaking so much of the world in ways beyond imagination?
What must it have been like...to live in times like those?

I'm so glad that they did all that work for us.

We can be so grateful that they helped return the church
to its original purpose so fully and so well.
How good it is to live in these days, 500 years since
this golden age of the church
when the work of faithfulness has been so well handed down
there's almost nothing left to do.

But of course, that's not true, is it?

The church reformed, is always reforming.

This is a saying theologian Karl Barth popularized in the 1940's
at a time when the world and the church all needed to remember that
the pursuit of goodness and truth is never done
and always requires diligence and our full commitment.

Of course, the reformers didn't do any of our work for us.

They did the work before them in their time, and they didn't do it perfectly.
There are terrible sins in the legacy of this church,
and others birthed from the Reformation movement,
as well as ones that preceded it,
and this will be true for church movements yet to be born.

We know from history, but also from our own lives,
that the church is not a place that has been perfected.

You don't have to do more than sit in a meeting
about the proper placement and lighting of the Advent wreath
to know that is true.

We know that Reformation is not ever going to be something
that deserves to be placed in the past tense.

The church has continued to be reformed in its life.

And we are being reformed still

So, as we think about what it is to be a Reformation church in 2017,

we might find ourselves looking backward,
but mostly to learn how to look forward
in ways like those faithful people back then must have been doing,
that we can barely understand.

Because I can't imagine being as brave as they were...
and yet, there will be times when we are called to be
strong and courageous beyond our imagination.

I've been thinking a lot about what it looks like

to find ourselves in a space where our deep convictions
lead us into places of uncertainty,

like they were.

I'm not sure the way to new life can ever be along a well-worn or familiar road.
Reformation is, perhaps, more than anything,
being led off the path well-worn, and into the desert,
into the unfamiliar.

And thinking about how both exciting and frightening this is
leads me to reflect on one of the well-known teachings
of Martin Luther,
about the relationship between the law and the gospel.
The one convicts us and the other frees us.
One guides, the other gives.
We need both, and, in fact, they are inseparable.

God's law shows us who we really are,
and where we have failed,
and points us in the right direction.
The gospel reveals us to us how God's love for us reaches too far
for us to ever outrun it in any direction,
and shows us who we really are in God's heart...
so much more precious than we can ever believe ourselves to be.

And, the thing about the law and gospel is that they are always for all of us,
all at once, and so they can never be pulled apart.
Because what's law to me, might be gospel to you,
and what's gospel to our neighbors might be a word of law for all of us.

I'll try to give an example.
Sometimes God's law for me, as a white person,
is that I benefit unjustly from so much inherited and unearned privilege
which comes at the expense of others,
and yet, this can be God's good news
for those who don't have the privilege and protection of whiteness,
who need to hear that God's love is so fierce
that it will always be at work to dismantle systems
that place one group of people above another,
and God will always be calling all of us into the work

of taking apart that unjust system.
Law and gospel, both at once.

Or, another example:

I have listened to many friends who are men
process something like this in recent weeks
after the revival of the #metoo campaign,
which was actually founded over a decade ago by Tarana Burke.

They have heard from so many women in their lives
that sexual harassment and assault have impacted them,
that they have asked how to be better allies to the women in their lives.

They heard a word of law in the #metoo's, a call to live a new way.
Many women also heard in the chorus of #metoo a comforting word
that they are not alone,
that their hidden shame does not have to separate them
from the rest of the world.

I also know it was still a terribly hard few days,
especially, for many folks who are survivors,
because horrible memories have been stirred up in our minds
like the dark waters of a silty pond, obscuring everything else.

This moment, too, held both law and gospel within it.

This chorus of solidarity was law for some and gospel for others.

And the thing about law and gospel, is it is almost always both at once.
So, I believe when the prophet Jeremiah, who we hear from today,
writes God's promise that God will write the law upon their hearts,
that he means not only that God carves into us rules to live by...
but also the promise of God's presence, always...
deep in every fiber of our being.

And this, then, is finally, the law and gospel of the story of Reformation
that we honor today for the chapter written 500 years ago,
that is still part of our story and that we will carry into the future.

The work of reformation is, of course, never done.

Luther didn't do it for us 500 years ago,
and no one has done it for us before or since.

We will find ourselves in spaces where our deep convictions

lead us into places of uncertainty,
like others have been throughout time.

And the way to new life will never be along a well-worn or familiar road.
And we will always be called to be a part of the work that is the journey.

And, even though we don't know the road where we are being called,
even though we are going somewhere we haven't been before,
we are not going alone.

We are being called into the unfamiliar. And we are not being sent alone.

God knows the road God is setting before us.

God will never leave us, even when we wander from where we ought to be.
No fearsome thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus,
because God has written God's own name on our hearts, and has claimed us.
And we will be God's people. Always. For the next 500 years...and beyond.

Thanks be to God. Amen.