

October 30, 2016
Reformation
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36 – The Son sets you free from sin
Christ the King Lutheran Church
The Rev. Dorothy Cottingham

Fellow Minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
Grace to you and peace from the God of Jacob, our stronghold.

I have a confession to make.
I don't want to preach a sermon about Martin Luther.
I'm not interested in a sermon about the Great Reformation.
I would bore MYSELF with a sermon about the re-formation of the church.

So . . . you're going to hear a sermon about the truth! The straight up truth!

Make that two truths.

The first truth is a hard one.

It weighs heavily on us in this gospel reading from John.

Jesus says, "I tell you the truth: Everyone who sins is a slave to sin".

If we take this declaration seriously, it ought to make us squirm.

It's easy to smirk at the selective memory of the believing Jews who claim:

"We are descendants of Abraham. We've never been slaves to anyone".

Really?

Did you forget about the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Persians
and in this present context, the Romans?

Really?

Never slaves to anyone?

How quickly they have forgotten their history.

But are we any different?

Do we take sin seriously?

We are quick to focus on God's astonishing and merciful welcome,
eager to avoid the law given to Moses on the mountain
which places our sin squarely in front of us.

And when we do face the law,

we generally use it as an intellectual exercise to congratulate ourselves
for all the sins we DON'T commit.

Or we use the law as a tool to blame, shame and name the sins others.

Rather than deny the depth of sin within ourselves

what if we name the many subtle ways we sin?

The sin that makes it really hard to trust others,
cautious that they may take advantage.

The sin of stocking up enough stuff for ourselves first and

then if there's any left over we'll share what we don't want or need.

The sin of skepticism about the future as God sees it and

Jesus preaches it, a future of hope, not despair.

Sin is not just individual.

Sin shatters whole communities.

The entire broken world is the result of systemic sin.

Every decision we make individually and collectively

can have an adverse impact on the health of our planet and
the well-being of persons both next door and continents away.

Sin, the sin that enslaves us is inextricably woven into our very existence.

As Paul says in the second reading today

“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”.

Considered in this way, the words we speak at the beginning of worship,
at the moment of our corporate confession –

“we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves” –
may be the most truthful words we speak every week.

If we ignore or minimize our sin because it's uncomfortable to confess it fully,
then the gospel is not good news at all.

If we ignore or minimize our sin
we are saying there was never a serious problem
to which the gospel is the shocking and startling solution.

In this post-modern age where everyone is suspicious of everyone else's motives,
where we are quick to judge the immoral behavior of others
we would do well to take a step back and
examine our deep need for the accountability of the law
that confronts us on a daily basis.

It is the law that leads us to the cross in deep sorrow and contrition.

It is at the cross where we find the astounding gift of God's grace and mercy.

It is at the cross that we see the reality of our frailty, our sinfulness,
the slavery from which we are set free by the life,
death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther was tormented by his inability to keep the Laws of Moses.

He recognized that we cannot,
on our own even understand the depth of our sinfulness.

We have a limited understanding of the depth of our sinfulness.

God gives a new covenant to the prophet Jeremiah for the people of Israel

It is our covenant with God, also.

The law is written on our hearts.

We know right from wrong.

But without the word and enlightenment through the Holy Spirit
we cannot know the depth of our need for God.

Jesus says it is only by continuing in HIS word that we know the truth.

And this is the first truth for today:

we are slaves to the depravity of our sinfulness.

One of the decisive concerns of Luther's theology –

and therefore OUR theology –

is to avoid minimizing the intensity, the seriousness of sin,

both individual and communal,

as though it were just a misdeed in need of an apology.

Recognizing the enormity of sin is inseparably connected
to the enormity of God's grace.

And here is the second glorious truth for today:

The glory of God's grace and mercy

compels us to first acknowledge the gravity of sin.

God's great love for us comes through loud and clear in the first reading.

After acknowledging that Israel – and let's be honest, all of us –

shattered God's earlier covenants and commands

God, in mercy says:

“I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sin no more.”

In spite of all our sin and wickedness!

God develops a case of divine amnesia

and blessed blindness when it comes to our sin.

God, through Jesus Christ regards us as perfect, blameless and whole.

It is difficult to hold these two truths side by side.

The danger when reading these classic Reformation Day texts

is to jump to the comfortable truth

we are “justified by God's grace as a gift”,

while skipping the hard truth that ALL have sinned;
that ALL fall short of the glory of God.

When we skip those hard truths,
we miss the height and width and breadth of the gospel truth.

To skip over the pain is to reject the relief.
To deny our illness is to refuse the eternal healing.

Luther maintains that
“we cannot make sin great enough because
we cannot highly enough exalt the glory of God’s grace”.

The law holds us accountable for our actions.
But the law does not justify us in God’s sight nor does the law save us.
We cannot be justified or saved by keeping the law.
The law is the mirror of our soul, a cracked and broken image.

In Jesus Christ, apart from the law, God’s glory and grace are revealed.
GOD’S righteousness through Jesus Christ
is the gift that makes US righteous.

Jesus offers these words of assurance:
If you continue in my word – hearing God’s word through scripture.
You are my disciples – learners of God’s word, followers of Jesus.
You will know the truth – without God’s gift of faith, we are slaves to sin.
And the truth will make you free –
free from bondage to sin, death and destruction.
Free to live in the grace of God as heirs –
as daughters and sons, not slaves to the law.

Today we proclaim these truths:
We are slaves to sin.
By faith we are set free from sin
Faith is a gift from God.
We are justified by faith.

Just for today, take these as your spiritual practice:
Acknowledge the ways in which we don’t even KNOW
that we have hurt or offended.
Ponder the small and the large transgressions.
Take time to reflect on our deep need for God’s grace and mercy.

When we feel the depth of our brokenness,
we can fall to our knees and rejoice with the Psalmist –
“The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold”.

Then we will know the joy of this promise:
God forgives our sins and remembers them no more.
Thanks be to God.