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Reformation Sunday – Oct 26, 2008

Using texts for Reformation Sunday – Psalm 46, Romans 3:21-24, John 8:31-36

Being Reformed

“Free” is not a word you would have ever used to describe the young pre-Reformer Martin Luther. “Free” is certainly not a word he would have used to describe himself. Luther was born in 1483 to very strict parents. In some of his writings, you read of the harsh discipline unleashed on him by his parents without cause, according to Luther. But his parents also thought that young Luther was brilliant and had all the makings of a great future lawyer. They did all they could to steer him in that direction, but their efforts to make Luther a jurist were thwarted by a lightning strike in July of 1505.

Luther, who was by then enrolled in the university, was walking back to school after visiting his parents at home. Suddenly, lightning struck him to earth. It is written that Luther, in that one single flash, saw the drama of his existence as he knew it then. This is how his vision is described: He saw God the all-terrible, Christ the relentless, and all the powers that waited to seize his shock of curly hair and drag him into hell. Quite a picture, isn't it. At that moment, Luther cried out “St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk!” And he survived the strike and then fulfilled his promise.

Luther entered the Augustinian monastery with the anxious longing that his sacrifice would finally stop all of his doubts and quell all of his fears. For as you can tell by his lightning-induced vision, Martin Luther had a terrifying image of the One who had created him. He simply could not figure out how he, a sinner, would ever be worthy of the Almighty God's mercy and salvation. The question tormented Luther. Shame overwhelmed him when he made even a slight misstep. And so, being a faithful Catholic monk, he would go to confession—very frequently. Some days he would stay and confess for six hours. Luther believed that every sin, in order to be absolved, must be confessed. The soul must be searched, memory ransacked, and the motives probed.¹

Luther could not shake the horrible sense that unless he purged his soul, he had no hope. He had no salvation. He certainly had no freedom. Martin Luther was absolutely enslaved by the power of his fear over the One he only knew as his all knowing, all terrible God.

Jesus followers were also enslaved by powers. Fear was one of them, but they were also enslaved by the power of tradition, the power of religious hierarchy, the power of closed hearts and closed minds. The eighth chapter of John is full of conversational wrestling over these powers. It is a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees, the religious elite. Chapter 8 is a back and forth, heated dialogue about just who Jesus says that he is as the Light of the world, and how his self-revelation did not fit with what the Pharisees had always believed and trusted to be true.

In the middle of the debate, Jesus turned to his Jewish followers, those who had believed in him, to make this statement, “If you abide and remain in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” But those to whom he spoke did not

understand. “What do you mean you will free us?” they asked him. We’re descendants of Abraham. We are cradle Presbyterians. We have never been slaves to anyone. (Isn’t it interesting how quickly we can forget our own history. One word - Egypt)

But Jesus was undeterred by their confusion. “Very truly I tell you everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free, you **are** free, indeed.”

Jesus was trying to help them see that as creatures, the bondage of sin would always have a hold on them. But, because of who he was, the bondage of sin did not capture them. In him, they would find their freedom. But Jesus knew that if they could not see their bondage to sin, then they would also never be able to see their freedom from it.

What Jesus’ Jewish followers in John could NOT grasp, Martin Luther had grasped, swallowed, and fully digested—at least part of Jesus’ point. Luther knew his sinfulness. He knew how often he fell short of being who God had created him to be. He firmly believed that he still lived as captive to the power of sin, to the power of brokenness, to the power of death.

And yet he also knew that as a follower of Christ, he was supposed to be free. So he determined he would need to try all he could to free himself. He became even more fanatical in his spiritual disciplines: fasting, praying, going on pilgrimages, even flagellating himself. Nothing worked. Nothing set him free. Luther did not understand. Instead he grew more and more tormented with each passing day.

Finally, his mentor, a teacher named Staupitz, decided that Luther needed to wrestle with Scripture for himself. Perhaps if he were made to preach and teach the Bible, he might find some solace. Luther was terrified. Yes, he was a monk and yes, he was a student, but amazingly enough, studying the Bible was not the staple of his theological educationⁱⁱ (we have to remember – we are dealing with medieval Catholicism in the early 1500’s).

But even though Luther resisted, Staupitz’s challenge was final. So Luther was forced to take his wrestling with his “God the all terrible” to Scripture. He was forced to immerse himself in the stories, the letters, the pronouncements, all the nuances of the Bible that make it such a thick text.

And, as a result of Luther’s immersion in the Bible, the Spirit started to work on him. And the Spirit moved through the words of Scripture showing him the Living Word. And Luther came face-to-face with a grace and a salvation that he never had known before. He had a Damascus road experience, but this time, without the bright flash. His conversion was a gentler one this time around. But it was still just as powerful in redefining his life.

“If you abide and remain in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” Jesus said to his disciples. Jesus’ promise of freedom began to take shape within Luther as he read the book of Romans, specifically the text I read earlier. He was being changed, being reformed, being set free by God’s Spirit.

These are Luther's own words "Night and day I pondered until I saw a connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by **Christ's** faith.' Then, I grasped that the justice of God **is** that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy **God justifies us** through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning..."

Luther's discovered the Truth that Jesus was proclaiming to his followers in John's Gospel. Luther discovered an overwhelming sense of grace and a deep knowledge that he had **already** been made right with God in Jesus Christ. He could therefore give up the futility of trying to do it for himself.

It was a whole new way of being. For Martin Luther had known for a long time that he would never be good enough to merit God's grace. He would never be good enough to earn his salvation, his wholeness. He was creature. He was human. He was fallible and would always mess up and fall into old ways of being and doing and loving. He would constantly struggle with the shackles of his sinfulness.

AND YET, the winds of God's Spirit moving through the words of Scripture showed Luther that what he could **not** do for himself, God had already done for him in Jesus Christ. For sisters and brothers, the saving truth of the Gospel is that God does not say, "I will love you **if** you are good, **if** you prove yourself worthy, **if** you do so and so, **if** you first love me. No. God says simply, 'I love you'"ⁱⁱⁱ. Now act like it.

As Luther abided in the Living Word of God, he finally drank in the good news that our relationship with God is made right, justified, not because we love God, but because in Christ God loves us.

And as Luther wrote, he felt reborn. He finally tasted this freedom that Jesus kept promising. He finally heard the good news that it was not all up to him. Instead, his salvation was up to God and God could get the job done. But then Luther quickly realized that his response to this freedom also mattered. For he knew he was **from** the fear of damnation in order to be free **for** faithful living.

So he stopped spending all his time in confession and began to use that time and energy to look at everything, including his own church, with different eyes. Suddenly, some things that he had always just accepted started to look unfaithful to him. Specifically for Luther, the selling of indulgences lit a fire of righteous indignation in his soul. The church was telling people that if they wanted to guarantee that the soul of their loved one would not get stuck in purgatory, then they needed to purchase indulgences from the priest. Luther's anger grew as quickly as the church's coffers.

So, Luther did what we are all called to do when we taste our freedom found in Christ – he put his faith into action and sought to reform the church he loved. For Luther, that meant writing his 95 Theses. He wanted to discuss and debate what was happening. He had no idea what he was unleashing into the world. For the result of Luther's taste of freedom was the Protestant Reformation, a theological protest movement, that blew through Luther in Germany, and through

Calvin in Geneva, and later, through Knox in Scotland. And the rest, as they say, is our theological history.

And the exciting news for us is that those winds of Reformation liberation continue to blow even today. The taste of the freedom we have in Christ is still on **our** lips. And just like our Reformed fathers and mothers of the faith, **we** are also called to be constantly open to the fresh movement of the Spirit in our midst—the Spirit that breaks open the Gospel, that breaks the hold of the powers that bind us.

It has been a long time since the Protestant Reformation, the theological protest, began. But we know it is not done. Our understanding of our freedom in Christ means we are always challenged to keep living into that freedom, to keep being reformed by God's Living Word. As seminary president Cynthia Campbell says, Reformed Christians understand that nobody gets it right all the time, not even the church. The Reformed way of being Christian subjects everything to question and critique – institutions, creeds, statements of faith, the church itself—because only God is God. Everything human is subject to, indeed requires, constant reformation by God's wildly creative Spirit^{iv}.

And isn't that exciting news? For we have just as much of an opportunity as Jesus's first followers, as Luther and Calvin and all the others had to be knocked upside the head by God's Spirit and shown an even fuller sense of what it means to be free in the saving truth of Christ. We have just as much as an opportunity as Luther and Calvin to be seized by the grace of God and reborn in our own lives of faith.

And who knows—maybe the next Reformer of our church is sitting in these pews. For we are a part of the Church Reformed, always willing to be reformed by the wild and free Spirit of God. And only God knows what God will do next.

ⁱ Bainton, Roland. Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950, p41.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Guthrie, Shirley. Christian Doctrine

^{iv} Found in a sermon by Rev. John Buchanan at www.goodpreacher.com.