

Sermon: Reformation Sunday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 28, 2018

Year B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Let us pray... Lord... take my lips... and speak through them... take our minds... and think with them... take our hearts... and set them on fire... with love for you... Amen...
Please be seated...

In 1985... Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner starred in a movie called... The Jewel of the Nile... a kind of mindless... cheesy... romantic comedy... and in what seemed like some kind of intentional humor... rather than some issue with her hearing... in what seemed like some good-natured... poking-fun-at-herself... kind of humor... my mother said she thought the title of the movie was... The Jew of Denial... and it makes me wonder... about the kinds of things... about which we are all in denial...

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him... If you continue in my word... you are truly my disciples... and you will know the truth... and the truth will make you free. They answered him... We are descendants of Abraham... we have never been slaves to anyone...

Really... because I thought there was this little blip on the radar screen... this short little period... this thing between Abraham and Jesus... called the Exodus... that Exodus Ch. 12 v. 40... records as 430 years... when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt... *What do you mean by saying... We will be made free...*

But they're not the only ones who were slaves... in our time... we remain slaves to all kinds of things... to ideologies... to a lack of critical thinking... to drugs and alcohol... to multi-generational dysfunction... to believing that we're right as opposed to just having

some preference... to food... to gossip... to triangulating conversations... to putting what others think of us ahead of what we think of ourselves... to reacting instead of acting... to the fear of being judged... or to judging... to teaching our children by example to roll their eyes... to sexism... to racism... to making jokes at the expense of others... to negative attitudes... to believing that others are less than we are... and we are slaves... to thinking that we can save ourselves... or invent ourselves in a vacuum... slaves to putting doctrine above relationship... or using doctrine to build walls... between other religions... or other denominations... walls with narrow little doorways... that allow only some in... and keep others out... but God is bigger than anything we can conceive... or any words we use to try to describe God...

This week... Joel and I attended the LARC Conference... at the Augustine Center... just northeast of Petoskey... Lutherans... Anglicans... and Roman Catholics... focusing... trying to focus... more on what unites us... and less on what divides us... and how do I say this... when the Lutherans or the Episcopalians hosted the conference... I felt unconditionally welcomed and included... as a priest who's also a gay man... but less so... the two times I've attended when the Roman Catholics hosted... and our speaker this week... Fr. Alfred Baca... is the Ecumenical and Interfaith Director for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops... and he spoke about the successes and the challenges to inter-denominational dialogue and communion... he mentioned the disagreements between the Eastern and Western churches about the *filioque*... and how they're being addressed... regarding the ELCA... he spoke about the more recent closeness that came out of conversations on last year's 500th commemoration of the Reformation... and regarding the Episcopal church... he shared a document which said that although "*Anglicans lack of a clear authoritative voice on moral questions... the way they approach these issues shares important common features with ours*"... though he hinted at certain lines in the sand that could not be accommodated...

And it would have been easy for Joel and me to feel singled out... but it's not just the Catholic view of LGBT people... it's divorce... it's Roe v. Wade... it's women priests... and more...

And some of these things have become lines in the sand for our denominations as well... some are certain that women's ordination is *too irregular*... as it was in 1974... when eleven women were ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church... two years before General Convention authorized the ordination of women to the priesthood... some are certain that the 1979 Book of Common Prayer... or 2006's Evangelical Lutheran Worship... had gone too far... some are certain that Confirmation must always come before Communion... and some of this reflects discomfort with a theology that is too open... though wideness is a quality which is conveyed in Psalm 118:5... *I called to God from my narrowness... and God answered me with a vast expanse...* narrowness can be controlled more easily... than vast expanses...

And sometimes... those who are certain that they're right and others are wrong... sometimes... the kind of certainty around religious exclusivity... or denominational tribalism... or partisan intolerance... is the kind of certainty that leads some... to send 14 pipe bombs through the U.S. mail to politicians with whom they disagree... or kill eleven worshippers at a Saturday morning service in a Pittsburgh synagogue...

In today's passage from Hebrews... Paul writes what became the heart of Martin Luther's preaching... that no humans make themselves right with God... through works of the law... that we reject works righteousness... and are justified by faith through grace... there's nothing we do... or don't do... we are all sloshing through glorious... radical... grace... we are all loved by God from the very beginning... we are all prodigal daughters and sons... who have wandered off... but who in our own ways... find our way back home... and find that God has been waiting for us... rocking on the front porch and looking across the fields for us... every day... and when we're still far off... barely visible on the horizon... God rushes to us... and throws a robe on us... and

welcomes us home... no questions asked... heaven isn't about pearly gates and gold streets... but it is about being with God... and discovering that nothing in all of creation... can separate us from God's love...

Yesterday... Joel and I watched a memorial service... it was held at The National Cathedral... and marked the 20th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death... Matthew was a 21 year-old... gay... Episcopal... college student when he was fatally beaten... the Bishop of Washington... Mariann Budde... and Bishop Gene Robinson were co-presiders... Bp. Robinson extended a tearful welcome to LGBTQ individuals who have felt unwanted by their churches... and affirmed God's unconditional love for all...

Some of you may recall me using the word *anamnesis*... Bp. Robinson explained that the *a-n*... comes from the Latin *anti*... which means *the opposite of*... and the *amnesis*... is where we get the word amnesia... so the word means... against *amnesia*... against forgetting... it's the word we use to talk about how Communion is present to us in the here and now... it's what happens when you go to a Seder in a Jewish home... that commemorates the Exodus... and it transforms something which happened to them... then... into something that's happening to us... now... it becomes your event... not something that's just stuck in the past... that's the kind of remembering Bp. Gene prayed for... because he said... *The reason we need to remember that... is that the bigger picture here is what we human beings tend to do... is label someone different from ourselves as Other... which is code... for Not Really Human... and then you can do anything to them that you like...*

Bp. Robinson said he doesn't usually speak for God... but he was going to... he said that the church... synagogue... and mosque... often get it wrong... but God never gets it wrong... he said he has a magnet on his refrigerator which says... *Jesus loves you... but I'm his favorite*... but here's the miracle... every single person is God's favorite... and he said to those in attendance... don't leave... without being reminded that you are loved by the God of all that is... beyond your wildest imagining... and nothing...

absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ... and at the end of the service... Matthew's ashes were interred in the cathedral's crypt... and Bp. Gene spoke to Matt's spirit and said: Gently rest in this place... you are safe now... welcome home...

What does all this have to do with the Reformation... Martin Luther never intended to create a new denomination... but the ones we've inherited are always being made new... and we must let go of the ways we celebrate division... one lifelong Lutheran at the LARC Conference went so far as to suggest that we stop commemorating the Reformation because of the distracting messages it can send... but either way... we must let go of the ways we speak with our own lips... instead of letting God speak through them... we must invite God's thoughts into our minds... and we must allow our hearts to be writing tablets for God's law... and love...

We can know who we are... and the progress we've made... and the ways that God has been formed within us... without being in denial... we can have pride in who we are... but we cannot make ourselves into God's only favorite... and everyone else into The Other... we cannot celebrate schism... we can no longer say out loud... or even silently to ourselves... that we are right... and they are wrong... but we can seek to share God's practice... of waiting on the porch for every daughter and son to return... and welcome them home... as Matthew was welcomed... without works righteousness... without too much concern about right belief... or right practice... but only with radical grace... unmerited forgiveness... and unbounded love... this is think... is how Jesus did it...

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