

Sermon: Reformation Sunday

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October 29, 2017

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

Tuesday is the actual 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation... but I don't think I can get most of you to come then... tho we can say it's been five hundred years since Martin Luther must have risen with no small measure of regret... five hundred years since he risked his career in favor of his principles... five hundred years since he named the indecency of church discourse...

Though we are reminded... that what Luther really wanted... was for the church to reform itself... and the divisions which have ensued since then... grieve God... we remember that Luther was threatened by the church because of his truth telling... by those in power... and this grieves us when we feel compelled to take a stand and speak truth to power... and we must face the fact that our need for reform is ongoing...

So while we celebrate Luther's whistleblowing... we lament the divisions it caused... while we celebrate the changes it brought in the church... we lament that we are not yet all One... while we celebrate all the good Lutheran qualities that have come down to us... we lament that some... on both sides of the aisle... still harbor animosity... still feel certain that they are right... and wonder why either denomination would want to seek reconciliation with the other... would want to move from Conflict to Communion... but it is the right thing to do...

No... today is not a remembrance alone... not a commemoration alone... but a reminder that not only church... society itself... and we in our individual lives... come to forks in the road... and have choices to make... about which way we want to go... and where we want to seek our guideposts...

And we have... once again... one of my favorite images from Jeremiah... *God will use God's Law and Wisdom as a stylus... and our hearts as never ending tablets... and the way we will know God... will seem to us like common sense... will seem like something that couldn't possibly need to be taught... because it will simply be common knowledge...*

The Jews who believed in Jesus may have said... *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone...* maybe they themselves had not been in Egypt... maybe not literally... but maybe in their DNA... maybe in their genetic memory... maybe in their collective unconscious... that experience remained...

When I was growing up... and we celebrated the Passover Seder... the freedom from that slavery... as the youngest... I was the one who was asked to ask the four questions... which started with...

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל-הלילות

How is this night different from all other nights... and there was this palpable sense... this *anamnesis*... which is the remembering of something that happened to someone else as though it happened to you... that the Exodus didn't happen to our ancestors thousands of years ago... but it was happening to us... then... in that moment...

And so the Jews who believed in Jesus may have said... *we have never been slaves to anyone...* but maybe some of their ancestors had been... and none of us here today may have been slaves... but what about the ancestors of our African American sisters and brothers... those DNA testing kits are revealing a lot more about ourselves than we've previously known or thought possible...

And while none of us here today were plantation or house slaves... how are we slaves to other things... like parochialism... to our denomination or religion... to dogma... to

one of the tribes to which we belong... how are we slaves to prejudice... to arrogance... to money... to our political party... slaves to the *status quo*... or to status... slaves to individuality... to taking what is normal for us... and making it normative for any one else...

And how do we bushwhack our way through these mistakes of the heart... how do we move closer to community... get closer to Truth... what can we do to help it along... I mean the Truth will emerge through every layer of difficulty we lay down... just as shoots of new life emerge through layers of asphalt on a playground... sometimes it takes a while... but God calls us into ever increasing Truth... and boundlessness...

Author Mark Twain suggested something that can help us find Truth... he said... *Travel is fatal to prejudice... bigotry... and narrow-mindedness... and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad... wholesome... charitable views of men... [and women]... and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime...*

But however we can expand our boundaries... whether worshipping at other churches when we travel... getting to know our Standing Together Muslim neighbors... having Fierce Conversations with each other... or getting to know our stories... we benefit...

Some of you know that I attend a clergy bible study almost every Wednesday afternoon... four days ago... eighteen clergy gathered... and within the group... the denominations that are... and have been represented... are Roman Catholic... Presbyterian... United Church of Christ... Episcopal... Lutheran... Reformed Church in America... United Methodist... and Orthodox Catholic Church of North America... it's quite a diverse gathering...

And in Eucharistic Prayer 2... from the liturgical resource [Enriching Our Worship](#)... we say... *In the fullness of time bring us... with all your saints... from every tribe and*

language and people and nation... to feast at the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world... so if we pray for this kind of diversity to come to God's Banquet Table... how can we possibly expect that diversity... to become uniform... how can we believe that God regrets the diversity of God's creation... I wonder if one of God's regrets is that it's we who have made it divisive...

But before the Law is written on our hearts... there's the external Law... and Romans says that through the Law comes the knowledge of sin... but the Law will always fall short because each set of circumstances is unique... and there can't possibly be written laws that anticipate every possible sequence of behaviors... by every combination of people... in every set of circumstances... with sometimes barely discernible motivations...

But the human heart... freed from the machinations of the ego... can transcend written law... and intuitively know in the moment what's best for each situation... in a way that unites rather than divides...

Some of you will remember us reading Phyllis Tickle's book The Great Emergence... she proposes that every 500 years or so... the church... and society... hold a kind of rummage sale... getting rid of those things that... like old clothes... no longer fit... or serve us well... or bring us closer to each other and to God... 500 years ago... it was the Protestant Reformation... 500 years before that it was The Great Schism between the Eastern and Western churches... prompted in large part by the unilateral addition of the *filioque* in the Nicene Creed... five hundred years before that the wisdom of Gregory the Great and the Fall of the Roman Empire... five hundred years before that God's Incarnation as the Christ... before that the Babylonian Captivity... and before that the end of the period of Judges and the rise of the Davidic Monarchy... every five hundred years or so... wrenching out of our collective psyche... the things that free us a little bit more from sin... and write a little bit more of God's law on our hearts...

Martin Luther was excommunicated for his truth telling... his life was threatened... the truth he told shook the church's foundations... and the society which surrounded it... and what's happening now... what we see when we look around... in our country... in the political landscape... and the world... is the same kind of rummage sale... and over the last fifty years or so... it's almost as though creation is asking us... *How's that working out for you?*... and like those in Luther's time... we're engaged in the same kind of corporate discernment about what's working and what's not... what to hold on to and what to let go of... and we experience this as birth pangs... some of us wanting to hold on to that which no longer serves the greater good... and some of us afraid to let go of whatever's familiar... without knowing what the new thing God will do... will look like... but either way... when we do these things... we remain slaves to something...

Reformation Sunday is certainly a day where we remember our history... but it is also a day to reexamine our faith... to ask... perhaps as we did at Seder... how is this time different from all other times... and part of that answer... is getting in touch with our genetic memory... with what we already know inside of us... with what makes us human... and part of that is recognizing the truth about our inadequacies... our failings... and our sinfulness.

The law is like a mirror in a room with intense fluorescent lights... it shows us who we are with every flaw and wrinkle... but God doesn't look at us in that mirror... the truth about God brings us new knowledge about ourselves... God shines a new light on us... writes God's law on our hearts... where iniquities are forgiven... and sins are forgotten...

The message of Reformation Sunday... is God's love for us... and Stanley Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew affirms that... *the heart of the life of the church and of every Christian is to be called to a life of love... but that calling is a lifelong task that requires our willingness to be surprised by what love turns out to be...* and a willingness to allow that love to free us from sin... it redefines all of us... from every tribe and language and

people and nation... as people of God... and as members of the whole body of Christ...
that's why this night is not only different from all other nights... but why this time... is
different from all other times...

Mike+