

October 30, 2011
Reformation Sunday
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First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34
Second Reading: Romans 3:19-28
Gospel: John 8:31-36

Re-Formed By Grace

What's the big deal with forgiveness? Why do Christians make so much of it? Who really needs forgiveness anyway?

How about...

- * People who carry around a big load of resentment—People whose behavior is worthy of being resented.
- * People who love to gossip--People who love to listen to gossip.
- * People who pretend to be what they're not--People who never try to become who they are.
- * People who are cruel to animals--People who care more about pets than about starving children.
- * People who get rich by cheating the poor--People who think being poor justifies stealing from the rich.
- * People who believe they alone possess the whole truth--People who think there's no such thing as truth.
- * People who irritate their neighbors--People who ignore their neighbors.
- * People who tell lies—People who tell the truth without a hint of compassion.
- * People who are getting divorced--People who stay married, but show no love to each other.
- * People who hurt others unintentionally--People who hurt anyone on purpose.
- * People who say, "All men are jerks." All the men who are jerks.
- * People who are blinded by ambition--People who have no ambition at all.
- * People who waste money on needless things--People who hoard money and possessions.
- * People who are intolerant--People who tolerate way too much.
- * People who are lazy--People who are workaholics.
- * People who take everything too seriously--People who never get serious about anything.
- * People who behave like bullies--People who condone bullying.
- * People who are extremely judgmental--People altogether lacking in judgment.
- * People who ignore the Word of God--People who use God's Word to beat up others.
- * People who fail to love--People who use love to smother and control.
- * People who break promises--People who are unwilling to make promises.
- * People who mean well--People who are, well, mean.

We could go on and on – I just did. So could you. Who needs forgiveness? Adam and Eve did. So did King David, St. Peter, The Woman taken in Adultery, The Prodigal Son (and his older brother). I do--for many reasons already stated.

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Martin Luther had a desperate, soul-deep longing for forgiveness. Yes, the great Martin Luther, whose memory we honor today, had a great need for the mercy of God. Luther has been recognized as number three on the list of the 100 Most Influential Persons of the last 1,000 years! Yet as great as he was, Luther felt he was never good enough for God. No matter how he tried, he was forever falling short. He was painfully aware of his inadequacy. He felt unworthy, unlovable, unable.

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Then Luther's whole life was reformed and made new by his re-discovery of the Gospel. As he read the scriptures, it dawned on him that life is not about being good enough for God. Instead, real life begins when we realize that God is good enough for us – that the goodness of God in Jesus Christ forgives our sin and makes us new!

The Christian church was re-formed by this rediscovery of forgiveness: a blessing that cannot be earned, cannot be bought or sold, BECAUSE IT IS FREE, the gracious gift of our loving God.

Luther's greatness is in his recovery of what had been there all along--but covered up, overlooked, distorted, forgotten: the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, the great news that we are saved by grace through faith.

Forgiveness is vital because SIN is so stubborn and pervasive (remember the list I began with.) In our prayer of confession we admit that sin is a kind of captivity: "We are in bondage to sin, and cannot free ourselves." And this isn't so just because the LBW says so. It's true because Jesus says so: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." It's what we try to describe when we talk about "original sin." Sin is a problem we all have, an inherent flaw, a problem we can't fix by ourselves.

You see, once you've blown it (either by what you've done or what you've failed to do), there's no going back. You can't rewind your life and erase the bad parts. Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, you can't put it back. We can't escape the sad reality of our own sin. We can try to rationalize, explain, justify, excuse or deny – but nothing we do removes the guilt of our sin. Picture Lady Macbeth trying to wash the blood off her hands. Think of words spoken in anger that can't be retrieved or unsaid.

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There's only one solution to the problem of SIN. A problem this big requires a miracle--the miracle we call forgiveness.

Consider how the miracle works: It doesn't change what we did or didn't do. Forgiveness changes us, changes who we are. It changes us from slaves of sin to children of God. It changes us from enemies into friends. In Christ, we are a New Creation, re-formed by love.

Again, forgiveness doesn't rewrite the past or change history. (This is what we often try to do as we spin out our autobiographies, real or imagined. We edit out all the bad stuff). Instead of rewriting the past, forgiveness rewrites the future! Forgiveness changes the script of guilt and regret and rationalization and denial. Forgiveness sets us free, removes the shackles that bind us, liberates us to live a new life. Forgiveness re-forms our lives, re-shapes our hearts, creates a new reality in which we can live – abundantly.

The miracle of forgiveness opens the door to an unanticipated and undeserved future: The

captives are set free. The separated are reconciled. Broken hearts are made whole again.

How does it happen? How can such a miracle really come to be? The irresistible force that drives the miracle is the Power of Truth. The power of forgiveness is the Truth – the truth about God’s mercy. (Not because I say so, because Jesus says so). “The truth will make you free.”

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Here’s the important part to remember: the devil doesn’t want us to know the whole truth. He’s a dealer in half-truths. The devil wants to keep us in bondage--to live as slaves to sin. And he’s been quite successful.

The name “Satan” means “Accuser,” and that’s who the devil is: our accuser. Satan is like a relentless prosecuting attorney--continually pointing out our flaws and failings – building an airtight case around our guilt and unworthiness. Fact is, much of what we’re accused of is true.

But get this: Satan’s real aim is not to convince us of the truth of our sin. His real aim is distracting us, keeping us from the greater truth. He wants to keep us from knowing and trusting the truth that is Jesus Christ.

To know the truth is to know Jesus Christ – which is to know forgiveness, which is to know freedom, genuine liberation.

Knowing the truth does make us free. Look how it freed Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Francis of Assisi, Paul of Tarsus, Dorothy Day.

The sad reality is that too often we dwell on the truth about ourselves as sinners more than we celebrate the truth of God’s love and forgiveness,

We believe what Satan tells us more easily than we believe in Christ. We’re more inclined to accept the bad news than the Good News, We believe in guilt more than grace. And this is the real bondage of SIN.

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And so we need to keep coming back to the truth. Time & again, you and I need to be reformed by the whole truth of Jesus Christ. We return to the truth that first touched us at Baptism: “We are liberated from sin and death by being joined to the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ! It’s the truth we hear each week as the Absolution is pronounced: “I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins.”

It’s the truth in which we share around this table: “This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.”

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If there is anything noteworthy about living as a Lutheran Christian, it’s having forgiveness as your starting point, your baseline, your solid rock, your blessed peace, your daily inspiration. Luther: “Where there is forgiveness, there is life.” Trust the reality of God’s gracious mercy for you and for all. Always be eager to seek it. Always be ready to share it. Live in and with and by forgiveness.

Amen.