

Always Reforming

Today, being Reformation Sunday commemorates the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. This is the time when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door challenging the church to a debate regarding the selling of indulgences. However, if we spend too much time looking at the events that led up to the Reformation and how the Reformation played out over time, then we run the risk of going against Luther's main objective of raising his voice against the church in the first place. That is, we might not focus on the Gospel of Jesus and what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means for our salvation. With the readings that have been assigned for the Revised Common Lectionary for today, a preacher can both stay true to the Gospel of Jesus as well as acknowledge this important part of Christian history and see how it points us to the future.

We must note that stand-alone sermons on all of the readings could be crafted and still make reference to the Reformation. One could use the text from Romans and then turn the focus on Reformation Sunday and show how it forms the foundation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that is key for Lutheran belief. Or we could point out how Psalm 46 was the inspiration of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God." However, care must be taken with this approach so as to not limit how someone can hear this text, making it seem as if that is the only way the text can be understood. Even so, we would still need to recognize how even Paul, in his theology still points to Jesus and the Gospel for inspiration of how to lead a Christian life and the meaning of God in our lives and how God works in our lives. In following in Paul's tradition of pointing back to Jesus, we come back to the Gospel reading for today.

When we look at the Gospel for today, we see a typical text from John's Gospel account. That is, the people to whom Jesus is talking typically hear Jesus on a literal level while Jesus is talking on a different level. Before we get into the text

itself too deeply, I do want to point out that while some see John's Gospel account to be anti-Jewish, it actually is not. Where most translations use the word 'Jews,' John does not always mean all the Jews. Sometimes, he can be referring to the Jews who live in the geographic area of Judea, sometimes it can refer to just a group of those people who had a particular viewpoint or he can also mean all the Jewish people. So, when we see in our English translations 'the Jews' we need to dig a little further to see exactly to whom John is referring. That said, we also need to keep in mind that Jesus and the first followers of Jesus were Jewish and they lived a 'Jewish' life and did not out and out reject the Jewish traditions. We could go into a more detailed look at this, but that would sidetrack us too much. Suffice it to say that John's Gospel account is not anti-Semitic.

As I said, the Judeans who believed in Jesus heard Him say these things about being slaves on a literal level, while Jesus was talking on a spiritual, theological, even metaphysical level. Even so, the Jews were not being totally truthful in that they overlooked their slavery in Egypt and the Babylonian exile in claiming to be children of Abraham. They even overlooked their current situation of being occupied by the Romans and under Roman law. Instead of seeing these people as having a skewed recollection of their own history or even that they may have narrowed their focus on themselves, we can see their reply as giving us an insight into their theology to a degree. Being called the Chosen People of God, to them meant that regardless of what their circumstances were in the world, they would still be God's people and while they would live under the rule of someone else, they would not necessarily see them as 'the authority' over them. In short, their identity went through God and not the people who ruled over them. But they still missed the point that Jesus was making. Jesus is saying that it doesn't matter what your heritage is, if you turn your back away from God, that is, sin; then you are a slave to sin. Paul picks up on this when he says that we will be a slave to something, either to

God or to someone/something else. Only by being a slave to God will we receive the promises that have been given to us through Abraham. But Jesus reminds us that our willingness to be a slave to God does not end there. He will make us free from sin. This freedom from sin, then not just binds us to Jesus, making us a slave to Jesus, but as we are told elsewhere, we are made heirs to the kingdom. Slaves do not share in the inheritance granted to the children. Through Jesus, we are made children of God and thus we are given the inheritance. Like a slave, whose freedom is only given to them by the master; we cannot declare our freedom on our own. It is only through the sacrifice that Jesus made that we can be given freedom.

However, it isn't a freedom where we can do whatever we want, being beholden to no one. To best illustrate what this freedom allows us to do, consider this story:

There was an English gentleman who was visiting the United States before the Civil War. He came to the city square and there was a slave auction being held. There was this one man who was taller and obviously stronger than all the others. This man stood perfectly still and the Englishman thought he could be a statue, except for the tear that ran down his cheek. When the bidding began for this man, the Englishman waited and then outbid all the others. He paid the cashier and then led his new "slave" away. After turning the corner, he turned to the black man and said, "You are free to go wherever you want." With that he turned and started walking away. Noticing that the man still followed him, the Englishman again said that he was releasing the man from any service to him. After doing this several more times, the black man finally spoke. He said, "Don't you see, I WANT to serve you."

The black man realized that the Englishman did something for him that no one else ever did. By giving him his freedom, the Englishman gave the slave a choice. The choice to either go off and do whatever he wanted or to stay and serve. This is

the same choice that we have when Jesus set us free. We are not forced to follow Jesus. However, we should want to follow Him. When we follow Jesus, then we are given a place in God's household and the promise of dwelling there forever. However, Jesus cautions us that simply believing is not enough. We must also obey what Jesus tells us to do. Our actions must reflect what Jesus Himself did. In other words, if we talk the talk, we must walk the walk, because our actions do speak louder than words.

Now just a brief word or two about the Reformation. Luther believed that the church should always be looking to re-form itself, making sure that what the church says it is and what the church does is grounded in the Gospel of Jesus. If doctrine or practices do not conform to the Gospel, then they should be changed. We should always be looking at what we do to make sure that we are still following the Gospel of Jesus, that we do obey what Jesus says to do. We should have a system of checks and balances that assesses whether we are still following what God wants, following what our tradition says we must do or even going off in our own direction, not being tethered to the Gospel of Jesus. Just like a ship that continually checks its course to make sure that they remain on course to reach their destination and is not pushed off course by the currents and winds, we must continually check our course to make sure we have our final destination in mind.

As we go forward from here, may the Holy Spirit who keeps the word of God alive in our hearts help us to continue the re-forming spirit of the Reformers continually re-forming us into the image that God has of us and may we be willing to go where we are led by Jesus.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon <https://youtu.be/BvgKmK240n8>

Service: <https://youtu.be/rZrhGnl86NE>