

Family by Faith

Well, it must be Reformation Sunday because Pam is playing Bach and we've sung that song by Martin Luther and Pastor Chris is preaching from Romans again. For those of you who've been here for all seven of the last Sundays in October during my pastorate, these indicators of a celebration of our Reformation history must seem as reliable as the singing of "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" on Palm Sunday or of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" on Easter. Together we have gathered each Thursday night before Easter to celebrate the institution of the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday and on the night before Christmas to welcome the day we celebrate Jesus' birth. Some of these celebrations are still relatively new for some of us, some reach far into our most cherished memories of childhood. But annual Church commemorations are important to us – they form a connective tissue not only to our own pasts but to the generations of saints who have gone before us and to all of those in the future who will come to call themselves followers of Christ. With these special, Holy days, we build our community, we might even say our family. So let's take a look this morning at why we remember this day in particular and at the astounding gifts of God to us that lie just under the surface of a celebration of Reformation Sunday.

I'm reading a book on worship practices right now as part of my own continuing education. It's always important, I think, for me to work to become a better pastor for you. It's my own personal way of working out that great Reformation slogan, "Ecclesia reformanda, semper reformanda": the reformed church must always be reforming. Since I spent my seminary years and many years thereafter focusing on the theatre ministry to which God called me, I continually feel years behind my pastoral peers in the skills and knowledge needed to serve you well. But in this book, the author, a well-known and greatly respected Evangelical theologian, sneers at the celebration of Reformation Sunday and other non-Biblical holidays as being unworthy focuses for worship in the Christian Church. Clearly, I think he's wrong. He makes this negative pronouncement based on his, very correct, idea that the focus of worship should be on what God has done for us rather than on anything we may feel we have done for God. But in remembering this 494th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, I do feel that we are celebrating something God has done for us. I look for the acts of God to be revealed through the faithful actions of those who seek to serve our Loving Creator every bit as much as through the miracles, large and small, which drop into our lives and cause us to say, "Surely God was in this thing." As we celebrate our Reformation heritage today, I believe we are celebrating not the words and works of Martin Luther, with whose theology and strategies I take serious objection at some points, nor the later Reformation teachings of Calvin or Arminius, nor the even later beginnings of the Baptist Movement with Smyth and Helwys, nor even the words and works of Paul, to which we will turn in a few minutes, but rather we celebrate the work through history of the Holy Spirit, who inspired those Christian leaders to express the historic faith in the Creator in new ways.

My enthusiasm for the celebration of Reformation Sunday may also seem odd to those who know my commitment to the ecumenical movement, to the idea that Christians must seek to transcend differences in theology and worship style and politics to realize the calling of Jesus upon us to be one, as he and the Father are one. I found a note of rather delicious irony in the fact that I went with Michael Ramos, the executive director of the Church Council of Greater Seattle who preached here not long ago, to meet with the new Catholic Archbishop of Seattle just days before this anniversary of the beginning of the split between Catholics and Protestants. But

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while ironic, the timing of the meeting did not seem to me inappropriate nor does the focus on the Reformation seem to me to negate the ecumenical imperative. As many of us have learned in our ongoing cross-cultural work with Evergreen Association, to transcend differences we must first acknowledge and understand them. I cannot work honestly for unity with my Catholic brothers and sisters or even within our fragmented Baptist community unless I examine and confess the roots of my own understanding of God and God's kingdom. And as I have walked down the conjoined paths of Reformation and Baptist identity and Christian unity, I have learned to see not only the deleterious effects of theological difference upon the Body of Christ but the salutary effects as well. Though we are called to be one Body, we are also called to be a body of many parts. The more I learn to appreciate the differences in the way people learn and think and relate to each other, the more glad I am that wise men and women throughout the centuries have found such different ways to express that one faith in one Lord and one baptism of which Paul wrote. I know many deeply faithful Catholics who would never be happy as Baptists and vice-versa.

The split that erupted out of Luther's posting of 95 theses on the chapel door in Wittenberg 494 years ago tomorrow has often been summarized in three short Latin phrases: "Sola scriptura; sola fide; sola gratia;" in English, "by Scripture alone; by faith alone; by grace alone." These were Luther's responses to his belief that the Catholic Church had come to put too much emphasis on the traditions of the Church as compared to the teachings of the Bible, that people were being taught that they could earn God's approval through acts of devotion to the Church and that the deep love of God for God's creation was thereby being denied in favor of a transactional model of salvation. In his reading of the New Testament, and particularly the Letter to the Romans, Luther was freshly convicted of both the failings of humanity and of God's love which offered life to humankind regardless of those failings.

Today's passage from Romans is at least one source for Luther's assertion of both "sola fide" and "sola gratia," by faith alone and by grace alone, and it connects back in Paul's argument to our Old Testament reading from Genesis. Paul's thought here is complex and preachers and theologians who often seem to enjoy further complicating matters have proclaimed for centuries that this is the key to the doctrine of justification. I am indebted to the 2009 book by English theologian N. T. Wright, entitled Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision, for actually making some points in the passage clearer rather than more obscure. With the help of Wright's insights, let me see if I can paraphrase Paul's argument in a way that will make sense for us, particularly as regards justification.

So far in his letter to the Romans, Paul has made the argument that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike has failed to live up not only to the Law, with its exacting demands for righteousness, but even to commonly held standards of right and wrong. To his fellow Jews, he writes that they should not feel superior to Gentiles simply because they have the Law, for they have not followed it! Because all people have failed to live in love for God and their neighbors, as Jesus might have put it, all people stand accused as if in a court of Divine Law. But for all who believe in Jesus Christ, for all who believe that God has raised the Crucified One, for all who share the faith of Jesus and of Abraham that God will lovingly keep God's promises, there is justification in that court. Seeing that we have joined with Jesus in our faith, God graciously declares that we are "not guilty." We must realize, writes Paul, that this does not imply that we

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ourselves have accomplished righteousness. We have nothing to boast about. Even the faith that has saved us, he wrote to the Ephesians, is not something we ourselves have generated but it is rather yet another gift from God, because of God's love for us. To return to Romans, there is no difference in this regard between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. All are found "not guilty" by reason of faith.

I want to dwell for a moment on what that faith looks like. In most of our English translations, Paul calls it "faith in Jesus Christ," which implies, as I said, belief that God overturned the human court's condemnation and execution of Jesus by raising him up on the third day. We are justified, found "not guilty" because we stand with the One whom God has justified. In the resurrection of Jesus, God has shown the world that God will indeed keep God's promise to renew all of Creation. Jesus is simply "the first-born from the dead," the one who shows the way for all of his sisters and brothers and for Creation. Jesus is the sign for us that we can trust God to keep God's promises. By believing in the resurrection, by having the faith in Jesus that makes us want to follow his teachings, we show that we follow Jesus in having the same faith he did in God's love and goodness. It is this same faith that both Paul and the story in Genesis tell us that God reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. Long before us, long before the Christ event, God made a wild promise to Abraham and Abraham believed God would keep that promise. Because Abraham believed, he was justified, counted as righteous. Because Jesus believed, although the Jews and the Romans combined to condemn and execute him, he was justified and resurrected. Because we believe, we are justified.

Of course, we know that our faith can waiver. Sometimes it seems very hard to believe that we are kept safe beneath the wings of our loving, mothering God. We see the collapse of the economy, the wars between nations, the change in the climate, the growing presence of those we do not know and do not understand and we fear for our future or the future of our children or grandchildren. We seem sometimes to ourselves to have lost faith. Does God now reject us? Or we realize that our faith is weak in action, that we have failed to hallow God's name in our lives, for example, that we have behaved in ways that are not loving to our neighbors. Have we lost the judgment of God that we are "Not Guilty?" By no means. As Paul writes later in Romans, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ." We are set free from the law of sin and death. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Again, consider the story of Abraham. There are plenty of things in Abraham's story which show him to be, like us, imperfect. Most telling of all is that he didn't wait for God to fulfill God's promise but took matters into his own hands and his wife's servant into his bed. The result has been continual enmity between the descendants of Abraham's two sons: the physical and spiritual children of Ishmael, the Arabs and all Muslims, and the physical and spiritual children of Isaac, Jews and Christians alike. Yet we are all the children of Abraham, as numerous as the stars. God's promise has been kept. And we wait in faith for the day when all children of Abraham and all of humankind will live in peace. God has promised it.

I agree with Bishop Wright on a further point about Paul's citation of the faith of Abraham and the union between Jews and Gentiles in Christ, or as Paul says at the end of this passage, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. It is in the extension of the righteousness of Abraham and Jesus to all humankind, at least in potential, that God begins the redemption of all creation. Paul talks about this more specifically in Romans chapter 8 when he looks forward to the day when

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“the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” In making of the Jews and Gentiles one family by faith, one family in Christ, God has begun the healing of creation. Although the road continues to be long and arduous, we humans now have the calling to reach out to each other in love not just as neighbors, who may or may not have anything besides place in common, but as sisters and brothers who by rights should love each other. Here is another reason why this passage, most central to Reformation theology, is also central to the ecumenical spirit and to interfaith efforts as well. And as we learn to love one another, we will surely learn to see the dreadful impacts on our loved ones of our continuing degradation of the ecology of our shared home. It is one thing to give intellectual assent to the facts of global climate change, as a majority of Americans have done, despite the posturing of some of our politicians. But once we allow ourselves to love our brothers and sisters who live in areas threatened by those changes, how can we not feel motivated to work for positive change?

Related to this are Paul’s final words in our passage about the continued place of the law in the life of the justified believer. Because we no longer stand in fear of condemnation from the law, we can see it instead as a guide for how we may love each other, our family by faith, more effectively. If we feel that we must live up to the law to be saved, it seems an impossible task, as indeed it has proven to be for thousands of years. But now that we are justified, declared “not guilty” for all time, we can react to the law or to New Testament models for righteousness as good guidelines which we will want to pursue in loving and grateful reaction to the love of God for us. “Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit false witness, thou shalt not covet,” and so on, go from Commandments to natural expressions of love for our extended family. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote, God has made a new covenant with us, replacing the law carved onto stone tablets with a law written in our hearts. Knowing that we are free from the law enables us to follow it more closely in the spirit of love. The pressure is off.

I promised a friend a sermon reference to the Cardinals, so here it comes and I apologize in advance to those who already think my baseball fever is out of bounds. As you may know, the Cardinals’ season appeared to be over in mid-August. They were hopelessly out of the race. They were no longer bound by the expectations of the fans and the writers, other ballclubs, even themselves. They had nothing to lose. They were free. They began to play better; a lot better. They got into the playoffs. Again, no one expected them to do well. They beat both the heavily favored Phillies and the Brewers. No one expected them to win the World Series, either (well, almost no one). They fell behind the Rangers. They rallied, then fell behind again, and again. In game six, they were one strike away from elimination twice. Both times, they rallied. There was no pressure on them – everyone had given them up long ago. Then in game seven, the pressure switched to the Rangers, who were supposed to win this thing easily for crying out loud! Result: Cardinals 6, Rangers 2. The Cardinals, no longer bound to the Law of expectations, found themselves able to fulfill the Laws of Baseball with ease. OK, I didn’t promise it would be a great analogy...

We began this Reformation Sunday by admitting that we don’t have all the answers, we are after all always reforming, but by affirming our faith that God’s reign is comin’, that we share a vision of a smile on the face of the future. We have joined with the Psalmist in offering a prayer to God for God’s protection and continuing faithfulness, a prayer that we then confessed to be answered

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by our own blessed assurance that we are in Christ, our Savior, born of his Spirit, lost in his love, that we know our God to be a fortress and a bulwark for us against any and all mortal ills. We've remembered the story of Abraham, the spiritual father of us all, through whom began the redemption of all Creation with one man's faith and with one tiny family. We've remembered the teaching of Paul, given new emphasis by a monk from Germany nearly 500 years ago and we have seen how that teaching reveals to us again the love of God for all humankind and our call to love God and to love our neighbors just like they were our family. I think that's a pretty good Reformation Day, even for a bunch of committed ecumenicals like Good Shepherd Baptist Church. I think we just may have heard the Good News. Now all that remains is to take it with us to whomever we meet, wherever we may go. May God bless the reading, the hearing and the doing of God's Word. Amen.