

Sermon

Reformation Eucharist Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary October 30, 2002

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John 8:31-36

Then 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 and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

I had thought of beginning this sermon with a cliché. At least I think it's something of a cliché, though a pleasant and happy one at that I thought. I was going to announce, as though you didn't know it—as sermons are wont to do—that today we are celebrating the Reformation's birthday. I was going to declare that we are having a birthday party today for the Lutheran Reformation. Perhaps I would even have us all sing "Happy Birthday" to the Reformation if that were not too hokey or flippant or just plain embarrassing. Tomorrow it will be, after all, 485 years since Luther published his "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," better known as the "95 Theses,"—it's not so clear anymore that he actually nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg as legend and the Wittenberg Chamber of Commerce would have it—but, however Luther delivered his 95 Theses on that fateful day, it launched a movement that led to all of us sitting here in a Lutheran seminary atop a hill in Berkeley, sitting here eager to celebrate the 485th birthday of our happy church.

But then I remembered Billy Collins, poet laureate, reading one of his poems on National Public Radio. The poem was called "Surprise" and went like this:

This—
according to the voice on the radio,
the host of a classical music program no less—
this is the birthday of Vivaldi.

He would be 325 years old today,
quite bent over, I would imagine,

and not able to see much through his watery eyes.

Surely he would be deaf by now,
the clothes flaking off him,
hair pitifully sparse.

But we would throw a party for him anyway,
a surprise party where everyone
would hide behind the furniture to listen

for the tap of his cane on the pavement
and the sound of his dry, persistent cough.¹

What image of a 485-year-old Reformation might be conjured for us if—in like manner—we were to attempt a birthday party today for our aged and aging church?

This I pondered, and the question cut too close. For there are plenty of witnesses about—some of them our family, friends, or neighbors—who, if they have ever heard of the reformation church, think of it exactly like an aged Vivaldi, quite bent over, deaf by now, pitifully tapping its cane, wheezing its dry persistent cough, gasping its last fading breath. Some of us on some of our worst days may think that way too.

But the Reformation is not Vivaldi, not aging like you or me toward some senile decrepitude, aging more like a fine wine whose taste becomes more delectable, bouquet more fragrant, with every passing year. In fact, the Reformation, to take a phrase from Luther, is, like the baptized, “new every morning.” reformed and reforming, renewed and renewing, fresh and refreshing, enlivening, enlarging, ennobling, inspiriting.

Take those 95 Theses themselves. They display a really early Luther still loyal to the pope and the hierarchy, but deeply disturbed by a merchandizing of indulgences that already then Luther recognized as an assault on what would become the two major themes of the coming Reformation: Indulgences compromised both human responsibility, on the one hand, and God’s gracious goodness, on the other. Indulgences were too cheap, and too expensive. Indulgences absolved people—for a fee!—from any responsibility to lead good and decent lives, and in that sense they were what Bonhoeffer would one day call “cheap grace.” They also required a payment (or a pay off!) for what God had promised for free. So indulgences constituted that subversion of the Gospel that we have come to call “works righteousness.”

So already in this early manifesto Luther was clear about the two fundamental Reformation insights: We humans are responsible for our lives. Yes, indeed we are! But

¹ Billy Collins, *Nine Horses: Poems*. Random House 2002.

God's irrepressible, expansive, inalienable love—as Jesus has declared and enacted it—will enfold us all and hold us within the divine care now and for all eternity. Of that we can be sure and certain. Both—human responsibility and divine compassion—are good news, good enough news to inspire us to rise new and renewed every morning.

For humans to be responsible for our own lives is good news because it suggests that what we think and do, how we spend our energies, where we place our commitments are not trivial or irrelevant. We make a difference in the world. We have enormous potential for great good and great evil. And God is depending on us to use our resources well.

And God has given us the resources to do it. Jeremiah speaks of some day in the eschatological future when God will inscribe the Torah directly on human hearts so that they will no longer need neither evangelism nor catechesis; they will know God from within their very being. But maybe Jeremiah didn't recognize the degree to which that inscribing had already taken place. Evolutionary psychologists tell us that the longing for God is etched right into our DNA as epigenetic rules that shape our sensibilities, inform our responses to the world, and influence our thoughts and behaviors. It's as though the evolutionary process has implanted a proto-Gospel in our genetic structure that sets us—before our parents say a word to us—on the path to God.

San Francisco Giants Manager Dusty Baker's 3-year-old son, Darren, has gotten a lot of publicity for his world series escapade, during which he was whisked out of harm's way at home plate by Giants first baseman J.T. Snow. In a story in the Saturday Chronicle it's reported that during the first two games of the World Series, Darren, felled by a bad cold, was stuck in a hotel room with his mother watching the games on television. When the Giants fell behind 5-0 in the first inning of game 2, we're told that Darren "bolted for the door and declared, 'Mom, the team needs me.'" He could just as well have said, "Mom, the team is in trouble, and I need to go help them." He reminds me of all those times my 2 ½ year old grandson Sammy has heard that grandma was about to make pancakes and exclaimed, "I want to help," while pulling his stepstool up to the kitchen counter. "I want to help," he would say, when his daddy was about to wash the car. The other day, when he had invited me to chase him around the house while he ran away from me with his new orange balloon given him at Trader Joe's, he said to me, "Don't pop it." And when I said to him, "Don't worry, Sam, I would never pop it," Sam answered as if to reassure me, "It's only a game."

Little children by nature want to help, want to be a part of the family project and make their contribution to it. "My team needs me." "I want to help." No one has to teach them that. It is inscribed within their hearts, programmed in their genes. It is the germ of human responsibility, which—with watering and tending and fertilizing—will flower into full bloom in an adult life lived not only for oneself but for the good of all.

But, of course, “we are only human,” as the somewhat shallow, often enough self-justifying phrase goes. But, shallow or not, the phrase is true. We’re fallible, we’re finite, we’re finicky and frustrating and sometimes feeble and frail. And so we flub and fumble and falter and fail. And sometimes we humans end up doing the most awful things to ourselves and one another. Of that we are acutely, painfully, conscious. And most humans are conscious of our foibles and our failings and driven to guilt and shame by them also because we are programmed genetically to see our failings and feel very badly about them. Those sensibilities are also inscribed within our hearts.

Last week Grandma bought Sammy a new truck, a nice accurate replica of a white Ford Explorer Sport Trac—so the box it came in proclaimed. Sammy was dazzled and delighted with that truck, he loved that truck, he asked to take it home with him, which was just fine with Grandma. It was his truck to do with as he pleased. Well, a couple of hours after Sam had gone home, Grandma got a phone call. Sammy was put on the line and he tried to explain in halting phrases that he had crashed his truck into another of his toy cars and the windshield of his brand new truck had gotten a crack in it, and he didn’t want Grandma to be sad. It was interesting that he seemed to worry Grandma might be sad, not that she might be mad. At all events, he wanted reassurance that it was OK, that he had not done something horrible or ruinous.

So already my little 2 ½ year old is showing the deep human need for an unconditional love, grace, and compassion that is the second insight about God that fueled the Reformation. Sammy was accepting responsibility for his action all right, but he also needed to hear a word of reassurance that he was OK and his mini-traffic error would not in some way compromise or disturb his relationship to his grandma.

The Gospel word about God’s gracious goodness is about knowing Jesus as the truth about God and the freedom from fear, guilt, and shame that knowledge brings. If Jesus makes you free, you will be free indeed. However feeble, frail, or flawed our behavior may be, we don’t have to fear that God will be sad or mad at us. That core message of the Reformation and the church founded on that good word is the inspiriting power that rejuvenates us and promises us newness on this and every day, that makes every day a bright, new, spring day, that gives us cause to celebrate.

Billy Collins has written another poem that actually captures the spirit of the Reformation more accurately than the Vivaldi poem did. He calls it “Today:”

If ever there were a spring day so perfect,
so uplifted by a warm intermittent breeze

that it made you want to throw
open all the windows in the house

and unlatch the door to the canary's cage,
indeed, rip the little door from its jamb,

a day when the cool brick paths
and the garden bursting with peonies

seemed so etched in sunlight
that you felt like taking

a hammer to the glass paperweight
on the living room end table,

releasing the inhabitants
from their snow-covered cottage

so they could walk out,
holding hands and squinting

into this larger dome of blue and white,
well, today is just that kind of day.²

² Ibid.