

Sermon for October 29, 2006
Reformation Sunday

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God's Reforming Grace

This past year while traveling on vacation something happened to Kathy and me that happens to people all the time. Finding our seats for the short second leg of our flight in Atlanta Kathy took the middle seat and I sat by the window. Just before we took off an airline stewardess took the third isle seat.

As you know, on short flights like these little, if anything, is said to fellow travelers except maybe a little small talk. But often strangers become the easiest people to talk to. Sometimes strangers share their whole lives with one another. Our new friend later said that she never spoke with passengers on that familiar route back home. But for some reason that time was different. Maybe it was because we were fellow Norwegians? Maybe it is because God has a history of bringing fellow travelers together who share the same journey of life?

Britta saw the book that Kathy was reading and was curious. Soon the conversation led to what was in her heart of hearts. Her younger sister in northern Norway was dealing with cancer and would soon find out the complete diagnosis and treatment. Kathy at that time had just heard from her doctors that as far as they were concerned her cancer was cured. Cancer, of all things, became the topic through which a new relationship took root. Of course the conversation led to family and its importance. Family histories were shared. We would soon be with family in Florida and she would be at home with her husband just a mile from where we were staying.

My college professor and mentor, Dr. George Forell, writes in his commentary on the Augsburg Confession, that summarizes what Lutherans believe, that people who cannot remember their past, who do not know their history, are people who literally do not know who they are. Every once in a while we hear about people who are amnesia victims, people who have lost their memories, people therefore who do not know who they are. We feel sorry for them and try to help them recover their past and thus their identity. We live in a time in which many people associated with the church believe that we can establish a religious relevance better by ignoring the past. Some would call this selective amnesia. And the results are the same. We forget who we are. We lose the identity given to us by God.

This is, of course, Reformation Sunday, a day in which we remember our past as Lutherans. By setting this day aside each year we remember who we are at the very center of our shared faith. In our remembering we do not just live in the past saying we are reformed. Lutherans have always been part of a reforming tradition. We maintain what we believe in relationship to the world in which we live.

The world in which we live in 2006 is even more of an extreme expression of what Dr. Forell wrote about in 1968. The recent most popular form of Christianity found in many congregations of mainline denominations, but especially in the growing evangelical movement, most often chooses to ignore church history. It is very common for sincere believers to read the bible

literally not caring about the lives and history of those to whom the words were first addressed in the Bible. New churches are emerging by the hundreds based largely on how people read the Bible today with no concern for God's presence in the churches throughout history. If we ignore our past as a church and the faith that is at the center of what we believe, we will no longer know who we are. We will be Lutherans in name only. It is even possible to so loose our way that we become Christians in name only.

On this Reformation Sunday we have the same lessons from the Bible every year. They inspired Martin Luther and our Lutheran ancestors to say with other reformers that we are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Those brief words define who we are as Lutherans.

Upon first hearing these words, the gospel, we might think that this is such good news that we could not even consider anything but to accept it as the only word that shapes our lives and causes us to believe and live the way we know God wants for us. Already in our gospel lesson we see this is not the case.

We prayed in our Prayer of the Day, "keep us steadfast in your WORD". Did you notice that Word is capitalized? In the gospel of John Jesus is described as God's Word become flesh. In Jesus we see what God is really like through Jesus' actions and words. We also see what we can be like through Jesus gracious activity. Many who heard that prayer heard "bible" when they heard "word". Our lives must be steadfast in Jesus in whom we have faith. We do not stop with God's revealed word, the bible, that points us to and illuminates Jesus in our lives and in the world.

Dr Forell writes that, "What really matters is that God loves us and that God has shown God's love for us and all people in Jesus who is the Christ. 'For his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us ...few people realize what a revolutionary assertion this is. It actually goes against all our customary religion. The notion that we are saved by good works is probably the most universally held belief of all people. It is the 'common faith' regardless of their religion or lack of it. It can be reduced to the common slogan, 'God loves good people and hates bad people.' Or 'Everybody is a self-made person, but the successful ones are willing to admit it.' thus being good we can assure ourselves of God's love for us."

When we say that we believe we are justified by God's grace we are saying that we believe that we are made right because of who God is, not because of who we are or what we do. When we begin our faith journey by saying and believing that God is gracious, we are saying that it is always God's love that calls us and everything that exists into being. By beginning with God's grace we are saying that we believe that God still loves us so much that God wants to stay close to us. In coming in person, in Jesus, God could not get closer. In Jesus we see that God doesn't give up on anyone and everyone is worth saving. God does not see the world in categories of good and evil. Only people with their own self-made religion see the world in those categories. And when it comes to the future we believe that God is consistently gracious. One day God will bring the world to its consummation, not its destruction. One day, in God's time, the world will be whole and perfect as only God knows it can be.

We believe that it is God's gracious activity in Jesus Christ that makes us right with God, other people and the whole creation. But as Dr. Forell writes, "When righteousness before God on the grounds of our own merits, works or satisfactions is thrown out the front door, it tends to creep in the back door. People do not believe they have a claim on God because of their good works often think they have a claim on God because of their good faith. They think that faith is some sort of contest where they receive an award for holding things to be true which they really consider highly improbable, or unlikely. Faith then becomes a new kind of good work, believing a fairly long list of unbelievable assertions. The more unbelievable they seem, the greater the faith of those who believe them."

Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is all about what God is doing. Even in the days of Jeremiah, under the worst of conditions God promised to Jeremiah, "The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

It is not easy to believe such things in a world that is so full of bad news, oppressive news, a world that seems impossible, by human standards. But in Jesus Christ we are freed to not only be whole but to also be able to once again hope. We are no longer doomed to despair and following religions of doom that only bring death and destruction to God's world. We are freed to trust the future to God and live as children of grace.

Once again on this Reformation Sunday we join fellow travelers of life awaiting God's miracle of faith restored once again by God's loving and forgiving activity. As we sit, often in the same pews surrounded by familiar faces and the occasional face of a stranger, we realize that we share the same history as people of God from many generations.

We know who we are. We are God's people, created, redeemed and sanctified, sealed in our common birth in Baptism. Through our calling we share the same journey of life. In our pilgrimage together we are now freed by God's continued gracious activity to share in each other's joys, sorrows and suffering.

Because we are on our pilgrimage with God, we are always people of hope. Too often in the midst of what we see we find very little reason to hope. But because we are people of faith, even in the darkness we trust God who is leading the way. God is making all things new and God will continue to do something new.

Walter Bruggemann writes, "The hope that must be spoken is hope rooted in the assurance that God does not quit even when the evidence warrants God's quitting."

Our hope begins and ends in God who makes all things right, all people right through faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith begins in amazement! It begins with God's grace. Amen!