



Lutheran Church of the Master

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“The Heart of the Reformation: We Fall – We Forget – God Restores”

October 25, 2009 - Reformation Sunday - John 8:31-36

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³ 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’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

The lady must have been desperate. She decided to write a letter to Dear Abby. Her letter reads: Dear Abby, I am 44 and would like to meet a man my age with no bad habits. She signed her name, “Rose.” Abby replies: “Dear Rose: So would I.” There’s more truth to Abby’s answer than her typical pithiness conveys. “So would I” – meaning that perfect people are not easy to come by. I think that you and I can relate to that. At some level we know that perfection eludes us. What perfection? Why even the simple thing that Rose asked for: having no bad habits, eludes us.

Military officers have an interesting saying. Whenever they commit a serious gaffe – when they seriously mess up, often they say: “I fell on my sword.” Meaning, “boy did I ever goof.” The person who falls on his or her sword has self-destructed or done something that obviously reflects badly on them.

We fall on our swords too. More often than not, though, we say, “I’ll never do that again!” How many times have we said those words just after self-destructing? In the guilt and anguish that follows, we think or we say, “Never again.” But before we know it there it is - that same ugly sin - you know the one I’m talking about – it just keeps coming back over and over and you can’t seem to get past it. And in frustration we say, “I’ll never do it again.” But before the words “I’ll never,” stop echoing – there we go again - we fall. Why? We want to do good – but we just can’t seem to. Instead, we fall. We fall.

You see, that is the one common thread that all of us share – people of all tribes and nations, races and tongues all suffer from this – we fall. In the second reading from Romans today, Paul puts it in plain language. He says to us, “There is no difference between people. Because all people have sinned, they have fallen short of God’s glory.” It’s been that way this side of Eden. It’s been that way for all descendants of Adam and Eve: for the prophets and the people of times past; for the pastors and their parishioners today. We’re all in that same briar patch – we’re fallen. The good news is that God is willing to forgive when we confess.

But there’s a problem. We forget. We have a tendency of not remembering. You see, it’s not a pleasant thing to be reminded that our very nature is flawed. Paul’s words, “All have sinned,” burn. Nobody likes to hear this. It’s so much easier to point at other peoples’ sins. And so like memories of a bad dream, people ignore this fact; set it aside; have selective amnesia. That is what was going on in today’s Gospel lesson.

The dialog was passionate. You see, this exchange between Jesus and some of his followers happened in the middle of several other intense confrontations. A group of religious teachers had just brought a fallen woman to Jesus. They wanted to trap Him. They said to Jesus,

“We caught this woman in adultery. Our law says that she should be stoned. What should we do?”

Jesus knew that if He said, “stone her,” they would accuse Him of breaking Roman law. You see, only the Romans could sentence people to death. And if He said, “Don’t stone her,” they would accuse Him of ignoring the Jewish law. So what does the Lord do? He reminded the religious leaders about what they had conveniently forgotten – that they too were fallen. Their condition was the same as the woman. He said, “The first one without sin can throw the first stone.” When they realized that Jesus had just stripped them of moral authority, they dropped their stones and left the woman alone.

The same thing happened in the Gospel Lesson that we just read. Jesus was teaching. He tells some of his Jewish followers that if they continue in his word, they will be truly free. But they react in almost shock. They denied that they needed anybody to free them. “We’re Abraham’s descendants,” they said. “We’ve never been slaves,” they claimed. “How can you say that we need to be set free?” they cried.

Talk about short memories. What about all of that exodus stuff? What about the parting of the Red Sea and the Pharaoh’s army chasing their ancestors through the desert? That whole “Moses-leading-them-out-of-slavery-in-Egypt-thing” was central to their faith. But all of a sudden - they get amnesia. And what about the Romans that were parading up and down their streets. What about the Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate? How could any Jew ever forget about all that stuff?

Nevertheless, the Jewish believers in today’s gospel say that they do not remember. Maybe they just didn’t want to hear what Jesus was saying to them - that they were slaves. “I can guarantee this truth: Whoever lives a sinful life is a slave to sin.” Boy that hurts. It’s always easier to hear that other people have a sin problem. But it’s hard to hear that we are the ones who need to be freed – that we’re the ones who’ve fallen on our swords.

There are two fundamental mistakes that we make as we confront our fallenness. The first is to do as these folks did: get selective amnesia; to forget or conveniently deny; to forget that the woman to be stoned - that sinner - is just like us – needing God’s forgiveness; to forget that we are slaves to sin needing to be freed; to forget that before God and before each other, we have a problem – we’re fallen.

The second tragic mistake that we make is to think that we can take care of the problem ourselves. We believe that somehow – by jumping through religious hoops – we can earn God’s favor. That has been the corporate problem of the church for centuries. When the reality of man’s fallenness raised its head, the church has offered all kinds of solutions to its people. It’s sold forgiveness. It’s prescribed ritualistic prayers and pilgrimages. It’s pointed the faithful to sacrifices and punishments and penances. It’s offered everything under the sun – except what Jesus offered in today’s Gospel Lesson – the TRUTH – the TRUTH that makes people free!

The Reformation that we celebrate today is critical and vital. It isn’t the nostalgia and pride that we feel as we remember the events of some 500 years ago. Celebrating the Reformation is critical and vital because it points us to the wonderful and awesome things that God did to preserve his TRUTH among us. When it seemed that the TRUTH was nowhere to be found, God made it shine brightly. Kings and paupers, priests and monks gave their lives to defend that TRUTH; to restore it; to proclaim it; to honor it; to lift it up as the only beacon of salvation; *this TRUTH*: that while we were sinners, Christ died and rose from the dead to give us a relationship with God.

And today, that TRUTH – that TRUTH is still setting people free. That TRUTH is still re-forming hearts. That TRUTH is still shaping eternal destinies. That TRUTH continues to bring comfort to our fallen lives. It tells us that even though we fall and we forget – God does not

forget; and God does not abandon. That TRUTH points us to one place and to one place only – to Jesus and his Cross and his empty tomb. God preserves that TRUTH to bless his people – You and me - those who have been chosen from the foundation of the earth!

You see, God won't permit us to forget that Name above all names – Jesus. He won't permit us to forget the TRUTH: That we need forgiveness. That Jesus came to offer it to us and set us free. That TRUTH will remain – because that TRUTH is the heart of the Reformation. Here's that TRUTH in a nutshell - listen:

"It is... taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith..." Amen.