

Reformation Series
Peace, Seattle
October 8, 2017
Isaiah 61:1-4, Matt 13:31-32

LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE

This month marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation movement, a movement which ignited when Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, taking the Church to task over practices he considered pastorally and scripturally suspect.

In the decades that followed changes unleashed by the writings of Luther and many others rippled through church and society at every level, changing forever the status quo and ushering in a new age.

We're marking this anniversary the next four Sundays by building worship around themes and texts and music from the Lutheran World Federation Global Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, last May.

The central theme of that gathering, and this series, is: LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE.

The three sub-themes are: humans are not for sale; creation is not for sale; salvation is not for sale.

We begin today with that overarching theme: LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE.

A number of theological insights emerged for Luther out of his life experience as an Augustinian monk, a student of scripture, a pastor, and a teacher, but none of those insights was more central than the profound gift of God's grace—the unconditional love of God made accessible to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But this insight into the true nature of God didn't come to Brother Martin easily. For nothing in the medieval church's understanding of God prepared him to see God as a source of unmerited grace—quite the opposite, his formal education and practice only prepared him to see God as a source of judgment and himself as a hopelessly condemned sinner.

Liberation? There was none. Freedom? How could you be free when you were chained to a theological system which tracked and weighed each sin—no matter how small—categorized it, and tabulated the price that must be paid to satisfy God's demands for righteous perfection?

The notion of a God of grace was beyond Luther's grasp. In spite of fasting, in spite of scourging himself, in spite of hour after hour of self-examination and every form of self-discipline known to his monastic order, the God of grace eluded Luther and he found no peace. His hyper sense of guilt held him captive. **All he knew was an angry, vengeful, judgmental God.**

His spiritual confessor and mentor Joseph von Staupitz, who spent hours listening to Luther in the confessional, challenged Martin to let go of his guilt and to love God.

LOVE GOD?! Luther cried, I HATE GOD!¹

But Staupitz, in his steady, calm way, persisted. And as Luther left the monastery to pursue a doctorate in theology, and immersed himself in Scripture, the clouds finally cleared.

¹ Scott Culpepper, <http://inallthings.org/luthers-persistent-mentor/>

What Luther discovered was this: The fierce side of God, God's wrath against a sinful and rebellious world, was not the only face of God.

There was another face, another side, revealed to humanity in the incarnation of Christ.

Reading through Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther came to see how a gracious God full of mercy was at work in the crucified and risen Jesus, bridging the gap between heaven and earth. By putting our faith and trust in him who gave his life for us, our broken relationship with God is restored.

The reality of grace finally washed over Luther like a great flood, changing everything he had thought about God, igniting a reformation within him that led to a Reformation in the world.

As Luther set about telling the world of the God of grace he'd discovered, he became a prolific best selling author. Three years after posting his theses on the door in Wittenberg Luther wrote a little essay entitled: **ON CHRISTIAN LIBERTY**.

In the essay he states his thesis in two seemingly contradictory sentences:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

When we put our trust in God and not in human systems of value—be they spiritual, theological, economic, or social—we find ourselves freed from all that would bind us. We find that no authority can control us, manipulate us, or take advantage of us. We are subject to none. We might call this freedom, **FREEDOM FROM**.

In his book, WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE? Philip Yancey tells of a postcard he received from a friend. The card had just six words on it: **I AM THE ONE JESUS LOVES.**²

When Yancey called his friend, he found out the slogan came from a man named Brennan Manning, whom his friend had heard at a recent seminar. Manning pointed to Jesus' closest friend, the disciple named John, who's identified in the 4th Gospel as "the one Jesus loved."

IF JOHN WERE ASKED 'WHAT IS YOUR PRIMARY IDENTITY IN LIFE?' writes Yancy, HE WOULD NOT REPLY, 'I AM A DISCIPLE OF JESUS, or I'M AN APOSTLE, or I'M AN EVANGELIST.' His answer would be: **I AM THE ONE JESUS LOVES.**³

How would your life, my life, be different, if we claimed our primary identity as "the ones whom Jesus loves"? Can you feel the spaciousness in that?

All our attempts to justify our existence. All our efforts to pay back. All that we do to get on God's good side. All the energy we expend at self-preservation. All the moments we judge our selves—or others—for not being good enough, for not measuring up; all of it melts away when we take the Lord at his word and say: **I AM THE ONE JESUS LOVES.**

When we live our lives as the ones whom Jesus loves, we are living in true freedom from all that would bind us. We are subject to none.

² Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace? Zondervan © 1997. Pp. 68-69.

³ Ibid.

BUT, Luther points out, this kind of “freedom from” is only one side of the coin. An opposite and equally important corollary asks what this FREEDOM IS FOR.

St. Paul says it in a nutshell in his letter to Galatians:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴

What freedom is and how it’s to be exercised is a hot topic these days. Freedom of speech. Freedom of religion. Freedom of assembly. Freedom to bear arms. These freedoms often seem to be interpreted as absolute rights to say or do whatever I want without respect to its effect on the neighbor.

So we’re having debates about what taking a seat or taking a knee during the national anthem should mean; and how minority rights should be protected; and where the boundaries around hate speech ought to be located; and where the limits should be on the right to bear arms.

These indeed are all precious liberties! But liberty that only lands on the FREEDOM FROM side of the equation, as Luther says, isn’t enough. Those who strive to be mature in faith must ask themselves another question: **How will we use this freedom? What’s this freedom for?**

Luther’s response was simple: Our freedom in Christ makes us duty bound to serve our neighbor.

The conviction I AM THE ONE JESUS LOVES becomes enlarged as, looking through the eyes of Christ, we behold an entire world beyond ourselves which God so loves.

So while the grace we receive in Jesus frees us from all that would bind us, it also moves us from a self-centered posture to an other-centered posture. Viewing the world through the eyes of Christ, we see beyond ourselves and our needs, to the needs of our neighbor.

Our nation, it seems, is in exile these days. So much violent rhetoric; so many violent deeds.

We’re not behaving like trees planted by waters.

- Our potential for civil discourse is weakening even as our positions are hardening.
- Our ability to hold more than one perspective at the same time is withering;
- We’re reeling from events we can’t control.
- We’re doubling down on corporate, industrial and economic models that are leaving many out and doing long term damage to our planet home.
- Our leaves are drying up.
- Loving the neighbor has become narrowed to loving those neighbors who share my point of view.

How do we get out of this mess?

In today’s gospel Jesus gives us hints about the nature of God’s reign among us.

First, he says holding up a mustard seed, God’s presence in the world isn’t always readily apparent. Signs of God’s reign don’t always show themselves in ways we might expect. Like mustard seeds they may be tiny and hard to see...hidden even; and might very well be mistaken for weeds.

⁴ Galatians 5:13-14 NRSV

But once the seed takes root, it shows a tenacious ability to grow in all kinds of soils and conditions. And as it grows, its limbs branch out until it becomes a place of safety and hospitality where creatures can come and build their nests and raise their young.

There's so much unfolding in the world that we can't control. But there are some things we can. We can be purposeful in how we model our life together.

- We can choose to take as our model for community the tenacious, resilient mustard seed.
- We can choose to cultivate in this congregation a culture that makes room for the other even when we may not always see eye to eye.
- We can choose to take the gift of grace we've received and to turn it toward serving the neighbor.
- We can make our prayers for victims not the only expression of our care but rather the first expression of a public commitment to work toward making our nation a place of safety with liberty of justice for all.

When we live in that kind of freedom, then we can say, in the words of Isaiah and of Jesus:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, for God has anointed us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. To comfort those who mourn in Zion, to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning."⁵

Our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton has said, "We are not called to be the church of the past nor the church of some distant future, but to be the church right now. For whatever reason, we are the ones God is using at this time, in this messiness."

God's gift of grace takes root in our spiritual lives, but it moves beyond that realm and into every aspect of the lives we live as human beings and as citizens.

We're never done plumbing the depths of that freedom, and we're never done asking ourselves how what we've received can be turned into something good for the neighbor.

Amen.

⁵ Isaiah 61:1-3 NRSV; echoed by Jesus in Luke 4:18