

## Reformation Sunday Sin, Slavery and Short Term Memory

I was somewhat surprised when one of the online commentators whose thoughts I read as I prepare for Sunday began his comments titled Reformation Truths with this comment: “I’m going to give it to you straight. This Reformation Sunday, I don’t want to hear a sermon about Martin Luther. I don’t want to hear about how great the Reformation was. And I definitely don’t want a history lesson.” Now since this year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther’s first obvious rebellion against the established church of his day. Since this particular Reformation Sunday is being commemorated with special events world-wide, but especially within Germany and the Lutheran Church and finally since David Lose is himself Lutheran clergy, I found this introduction striking. It definitely got my attention. Reformation Sunday is identified on our liturgical calendar each year, but it usually passes without much fanfare. Not all that long ago, there was this same type of commemoration about events associated with John Calvin and his actions—500 years ago which were highly important in the development of Reformed Theology. Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, also commented about all the events surrounding this year. Her comment was that some misleading terminology was being applied to the occasion. She objected to these events being called celebrations—rather than commemorations. She said that we need to discard any notion that Luther, Calvin, or any other human being was the one who has ushered in God’s grand plan for the church or the world. Her comments reminded me that Karl Barth, a notable 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian called the divisions, all the divisions, within the body of Christ a scandal. I agree that celebrating those divisions is questionable because clearly Christ calls us to be united. Barth called all the divisions, including that between Jews and Christians; Catholic and Orthodox; and all the other divisions which have risen a scandal because they run counter to God’s call for inclusive covenant community living according to the God’s ways, not human ones. Reformation Sunday, at its theological best, ought to chasten our pride and heighten our self-examination as we go about being Christ’s disciples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because we are so far from achieving that vision. By its nature, Reformation Sunday calls us to remember that God is always doing a new thing, but we don’t always perceive it. God’s salvation story is just that: God’s. Our time is merely a chapter of a narrative we did not conceive nor create. Although the lectionary I most often use lists texts for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, there are other, different texts suggested for Reformation Sunday, and those are the ones which I read for today. I think that they supply us with some insights we need as we think about Reformation 500 years after the movement began; as we consider the push by the Reformers to return to the texts of Scripture. The text from Jeremiah reminds us that God continues the covenant relationship despite the failings of human beings to be faithful to their responsibilities under it. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke.” The new covenant God proclaims through Jeremiah is not going to change the responsibilities of the people. “But this is the covenant that I will **make within** them, and **I will write it on their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” This new covenant will provide knowledge of the Lord

from the least to the greatest, and will mean the forgiveness for their iniquity is the promise. And importantly, the text ends with God's promise to remember their **sin** no more.

Within that last promise is the key to much of the issue which causes the difficulty we have in our lives of discipleship. When I read the text, or just now, when I repeated it—did you hear a “s” on the end of the word sin? This seems to be a point of grammar, but it reflects the way we often speak of sin in the plural when we should focus on the singular which Scripture most often uses. When we talk about sin, it's almost always in the plural—sins—describing specific bad things we have done. But sin as described across Scripture and particularly in Paul's letter to the Romans, is not so much a thing done as it is a focus—the power that seeks to rob the children of God of abundant life—and a condition in which we are trapped. Our passage from Romans began with the designation of the Law as the giving knowledge by which the whole world may be held accountable to God. It sets out the boundaries for the lives we are called to live. But Paul also explains, “For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deed prescribed by the Law, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Again, sin is given in the singular. Paul continues, saying that God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ is how justification is obtained. “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” This justification by the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what, according to Paul sets us free from the bondage of slavery to sin. The writings of Paul were reported by Luther as the Scripture which enlightened his understanding that redemption comes through faith alone. While we affirm this, we often still tend to add that “s” to what we perceive as the problem—those things that we do. This brings us to the gospel lesson chosen from John instead of Matthew. In this text we have Jesus speaking of sin. Jesus is speaking with some who had believed in him and says: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Those who heard this pronouncement were not happy with this as it implied that they were not free. “They answered him, ‘We are descendents of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.’” Wait a minute—who are they kidding? They are the descendents of Abraham and are claiming they have never been slaves to anyone? They are identified in the passage as Jews, and as we read the Hebrew text they preserved of their release from slavery in Egypt—in today's text from Jeremiah long after the event, we hear of their rescue from slavery in Egypt by God's hand. Not to mention that they lived in exile as slaves in Babylon and are now themselves living under the rule of Rome and are very much enslaved to the power of the Empire. What are they thinking to make such a statement? Are they making a joke? No, this perception is no joke. This is denial which as Mark Twain reminds us, “ain't just a river in Egypt. The questions is, are we any different? Do we take sin, in the singular, seriously? Sin, not as a theological category, not sin as a rhetorical devise by which to judge or shame others. Do we take sin, our sin seriously? We are very much indoctrinated in the concept of freedom, of individual freedoms. We, I think, tend to discredit any notion that we are slaves to something. Our response would likely be: We are Americans and we are free. When those in Jesus' audience follow their assertion of their non-slave status by asking Jesus what he means, his response is “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” In this statement we have two understandings of “sin”. First the one which is an act that is committed. Secondly, the type of sin that is inherent in our

hearts and minds. This latter type of sin spoken of by Jesus is the kind of sin that makes it hard for us to share with others the way we should, afraid that there really isn't enough to go around and we need to get our share first. The kind of sin that makes it hard to imagine the future as God sees it and as Jesus preaches and proclaims it as we should. Instead, we accept the status quo of the broken world and play by the established rules of the empire, doing the best that we can rather than taking care of our neighbors. This is a truth that Jesus speaks then and now. It is a truth that resonates back to the promise made to Jeremiah that God would place knowledge of God's ways within—it is when the work of the Holy Spirit within moves us toward being the reformed—transformed children of God—it is a truth that will set us free, but it is also likely have another effect first. Gloria Steinem once said, about an entirely different subject, that the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off. That is the reaction of Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> century believers—the question is: what is our response? For the truth of Jesus, the truth at the heart of the Reformation—is that we are sinners—God's fallen, failing, and confused children. The danger when reading the Reformation story is the tendency to focus on the good news—the good stuff—found there. We are justified by God's grace as a gift. True, but does that mean that we get to skip over the hard part, the part that stings: “all have sinned and have fallen short” and “all who have sinned are slaves of sin.” The cost of skipping over the hard truth, to ignore the need to be obedient to the law and ways of God is to miss the gospel. To skip over the pain is to reject relief, to deny our illness is to refuse eternal healing. Because if you don't recognize your need for healing, will you seek the cure? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.