

SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sermon October 25, 2020

John 8:31-36

I'm going to give it to you straight. This Reformation Sunday, you're not going to hear a sermon about Martin Luther. You're not going to hear about how great the Reformation was. And you definitely won't get a history lesson. What will you get? The truth, straight up.

Make that two truths, actually. The first is the hard one. And it bears down on us like a freight train in the gospel reading from John appointed for this day, when Jesus says, "I tell you the truth: everyone who sins is a slave to sin." Odds are, if we take it seriously, we're not going to like what Jesus says here any better than his original audience did. To be honest, it's hard not to smirk at the selective memory of Jesus' hearers when they claim, "We are the descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." *Never been slaves?* What happened to the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and now the Romans? Are you kidding?

No, this is no joke, this is denial which, as Mark Twain reminds us, "ain't just a river in Egypt." But are we any different? Do we take sin seriously? I don't mean sin as a theological category, sin as a rhetorical device, or sin as a tool by which to shame others. No, I mean sin. *Our sin*. The kind of sin that makes it really hard for me to trust others the way I should, worrying that they may take advantage of me. The kind of sin that makes it hard for me to share with others the way I should, afraid that there really isn't enough to go around and I'd better get mine first. The kind of sin that makes it hard to imagine the future as God sees it, instead accepting the status quo, playing by the established rules, and doing the best I can rather than taking care of my neighbor.

And it's not just individual sins, either. It's this whole broken and fallen world, where I know that nearly every decision I make -- from the

clothes I wear to the car I drive -- contributes in adverse ways to health of the planet and the well-being of persons continents away from me. Sin, the sin that enslaves, is woven into our existence. As Paul says in the second reading, "*All* have sinned and fallen short." Seen this way, the words we say in confession -- we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves -- may be the most truthful words we ever speak.

So that's the first word. We, like Jesus' original audience, are slaves to sin. We can earn all we want, pretend all we want, say "okay" every time someone asks us how we're doing, but it doesn't change the fact that we are not living up to the vision God has for us and deep down we know it. That's the truth, and as Gloria Steinem once said, "the truth will set you free, but first it will tick you off."

Or make that put you to death. That's, of course, why we'd rather deny our circumstances rather than face the truth. Because the truth is that we can grow but not fully change, we can help this world but cannot save it. We are, ultimately, insufficient for our own salvation, let alone that of anyone else. And that word, to the self-made man or woman of this age, is death.

Which is why we also need so desperately to hear the second truth, -- the truth about God's great love for us. It comes through loud and clear in the first reading for this day, where after acknowledging that Israel -- and, let's be honest, all of us -- shattered God's covenant and commands, God nevertheless says, "I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sin no more." That's right, despite everything God doesn't just forgive but also forgets. God develops a case of intentional amnesia when it comes to our sin and regards us as if we were perfect, blameless and whole. God regards us, that is, as if we were Christ.

Wait, did I say that truth is the easier one? Hmmmm. I may want to reconsider. Because here's the thing: as much as it hurts being justly accused, sometimes I think it hurts even more when we're unjustly forgiven. This may be hard to explain at first, but maybe a story will help.

Picture, for a moment, two young men, brothers, playing touch football on a deserted high school field. After playing for some time, they begin to argue (over what they will later not recall), and then to push and to shove each other. Finally the older of the two shoves the other one violently away, and then, clenching his fists, taunts him saying, "Go ahead. Hit me. Give me an excuse to pound you." The younger one just shakes his head, moving neither closer nor further away. The older one, angered further, repeats his taunt: "C'mon. Take a swing. I dare ya." Again, the younger brother shakes his head from side to side, as the older one continues to badger and ridicule him. Finally, as tears begin flowing out of his eyes, he manages to choke out just one word, "No." Enraged at being denied, the older one moves forward and shoves his younger brother again, harder than before. "C'mon. Hit me! Hit me!" The younger brother, tears streaming down his face, says amidst his sobs, "No. I will not hit my brother." "C'mon," the older one jeers again. "Go ahead." "No. I will not hit my brother. I will not hit my brother. I can't hit you. I love you." That older brother was me.

How do we respond to God's offer of forgiveness? One *would think* that the pardoned sinner, like a pardoned criminal, would gratefully and earnestly mend his or her ways. And one *would think* that being confronted by my younger brother's word of love, I would have immediately acknowledged my poor behavior and tried to make amends. But not so. No. The only thing that I acknowledged in the face of my brother's grace was that I had not gotten my way, that my brother had thwarted my will, and so, far from making amends, I stomped off to the car, bitter and angry, and pulled away, leaving my brother to walk the three miles back to our home. But then, as I was turned onto the street, I looked over and saw my brother, with the football tucked under his arm, walking home with his head bowed in pain, tears still streaming down his face. And I stopped...but not because I wanted to. No, not even then did I want to stop, but I couldn't go on, for finally his love had -- had what? -- won me over? No, exactly the opposite: Finally his love had broken my will, killed that arrogant, prideful, and insecure self that demands to be always in control.

And believe you me, that is always the way it is. You are no different. "I will not hit my brother." "I love you." "I will remember your sin no more." To the one who is unprepared to admit defeat, you see, to admit his or her need for forgiveness, even the purest words of grace give offense and seem a disgrace. And so God must take control from us, must, kill us by grace so that, also by God's grace, we may be raised to new life.

For the truth of the Son, the truth that makes you free, the truth at the heart of the 95 theses which Luther nailed to the door at the Wittenburg church, is that we *are* sinners -- God's fallen, flailing, and confused children -- from birth to death. Sinners that no amount of indulgences or good works can ever redeem. Sinners so corroded by fear that only the very blood of the Son of God can cleanse them, so deeply stained by insecurity that only God alone could forgive them.

But we are also those sinners for whom Christ died. We are those sinners, that is, who, dead to the law, are now free to love and serve our neighbor extravagantly, daring to care for the poor, to give witness to the gospel, to help our neighbor, and to share all that we have and are no matter what. For we are, finally, those justified sinners who, having died with Christ, will also rise again with him, to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

- Rev Dennis Schmidt