

John 8: 31-36

IN OUR CONFIRMATION CLASS, WE HAVE A COMBINATION OF UNITED METHODISTS AND LUTHERANS, SO WE WILL STUDY BOTH JOHN WESLEY AND MARTIN LUTHER. HISTORY PERHAPS ALL OF US SHOULD REFRESH OURSELVES WITH. TODAY WE CELEBRATE REFORMATION SUNDAY. MARTIN LUTHER AND EVERYTHING LUTHERAN. WE ALL HAVE A FAMILY STORY..HOW WE GOT TO THIS POINT IN HISTORY. STORIES ABOUT PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS, ABOUT THE THINGS THAT HAVE SHAPED OUR FAMILIES OVER THE YEARS. REFORMATION SUNDAY IS A DAY WHEN WE REMEMBER AND RE-TELL THE FAMILY STORIES OF OUR FAITH. WHEN MARTIN LUTHER WAS A YOUNG MONK HE WAS OBSESSIVE ABOUT NOT SINNING. HE TOOK THE SAYING "FEAR OF GOD" TO A WHOLE OTHER LEVEL. HE WAS CONSUMED WITH WORRY ABOUT BEING RIGHTEOUS IN GOD'S EYES. HE CONFESSED HIS SINS MULTIPLE TIMES EVERY DAY AND WAS SO ANXIOUS ABOUT SIN THAT HIS CONFESSOR TOLD HIM HE NEEDED TO RELAX AND TRUST GOD'S LOVE FOR HIM. LUTHER WAS STRUGGLING WITH THE NEED TO CONFESS COMPLETELY EVERYTHING HE HAD EVER DONE WRONG. HE WORE HIS CONFESSOR OUT, TRYING TO REMEMBER EVERY SIN HIS MIND WOULD TRY TO COVER UP. ON AT LEAST ONE OCCASION, HE CONFESSED FOR SIX HOURS STRAIGHT. LUTHER LATER ADMITTED AT THAT TIME HE WAS ANGRY WITH GOD FOR OUR APPARENT REQUIREMENT TO STRIVE FOR UNATTAINABLE RIGHTEOUSNESS. REFLECTING BACK ON THOSE YEARS LUTHER WROTE, "I WAS MORE THAN ONCE DRIVEN TO THE VERY ABYSS OF DESPAIR SO THAT I WISHED I HAD NEVER BEEN CREATED."

BUT ONE DAY WHILE READING THE BOOKS OF ROMANS LUTHER HAD HIS BIG BREAKTHROUGH. REFLECTING ON THE PHRAISE "THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD" LUTHER SAID THE GOSPEL WAS TRULY REVEALED TO HIM AND HE FELT AS THOUGH HE WAS ALTOGETHER BORN ANEW AND HAD ENTERED THE GATES OF PARADISE. THIS BREAKTHROUGH SPARKED THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION, WHICH WE CELEBRATE TODAY. MARTIN LUTHER NIALED THE 95 THESES ONTO THE CHURCH DOORS IN WITTENBERG ON OCTOBER 31, 1517—THE DAY WE MARK AS THE START OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION. LUTHER'S LIST RAISED 95 POINTS FOR THEOLOGICAL DISPUTE WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, ASSERTING THAT MANY OF ITS DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES WERE AT VARIANCE WITH SCRIPTURE. POSTING SUCH TOPICS FOR DEBATE ON CHURCH DOORS WAS THE SOCIAL MEDIA OF THE TIME! LUTHER'S POST SOON WENT VIRAL, SETTING OFF A LONG-LASTING FIRESTORM OF POLITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONFLICT ACROSS EUROPE.

INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, IN 1738, THE FOUNDER OF THE METHODIST MOVEMENT, JOHN WESLEY, RELUCTANTLY ATTENED A PRAYER MEETING IN LONDON. IT WAS A TIME HE WAS STRUGGLING WITH HIS WORTHINESS IN CHRIST'S EYES. THAT NIGHT AS HE HEARD A READING FROM LUTHER'S PREFACE TO THE ESPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, HE FELT HIS HEART STRANGELY WARMED AND TRUSTED CHRIST ALONE FOR HIS SALVATION.

IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING, JESUS TELLS THE CROWDS THAT IF THEY KNOW THE TRUTH, THE TRUTH WILL SET THEM FREE. THE TRUTH LUTHER DISCOVERED IN THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE WAS SOMETHING HE'D READ MANY TIMES BEFORE BUT DIDN'T GRASP. IT TOOK THE STRUGGLE WITH HIS OWN DOUBTS AND FAILED ATTEMTPS AT RIGHTEOUSNESS TO

UNDERSTAND WHAT SCRIPTURE WAS TRULY SAYING. HE DISCOVERED THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL, THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE AND LOVE. THE TRUTH THAT GOD IS ON OUR SIDE. THE TRUTH THAT WE DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT EARNING OUR WAY INTO RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, BECAUSE GOD HAS SET THE RELATIONSHIP RIGHT IN CHRIST.

THE TRUTH WILL SET US FREE. PEOPLE HAVE A TENDENCY TO WANT TO KNOW THE RIGHT ANSWERS. THINKING WE HAVE ALL THE RIGHT ANSWERS GIVES US A SENSE OF CONTROL AND POWER. HUMAN BEINGS WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH, LIKE IT'S SOMETHING WE POSSESS AND HAVE CONTROL OVER IT. BUT WHAT JESUS IS REALLY TALKING ABOUT IS THAT HE IS THE TRUTH. THE TRUTH WHICH SETS US FREE ISN'T SOME PIECE OF KNOWLEDGE, IT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST. JESUS IS NOT SOME IDEA. NOT SOME CONCEPT OR THEORY. JESUS IS THE TRUTH WHICH SETS US FREE. LUTHER DISCOVERED THIS IS A GIFT. WE CAN'T EARN BEING RIGHTEOUS IN GOD'S EYES BUT WE ARE GIVEN THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS AS A GIFT. BUT EVEN THAT CONCEPT IS NOT THE TRUTH THAT SETS US FREE, IT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BEHIND THE CONCEPT. KNOWING ABOUT GOD'S GRACE CAN EASE OUR ANXIETY, BUT IT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BEHIND THE KNOWLEDGE THAT SETS US FREE. IT IS THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST WHO SETS US FREE.

THE IDEA THAT GOOD DEEDS CAN GET YOU INTO HEAVEN, OR WHAT LUTHER CALLED "WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS" IS REJECTED BY MOST CHRISTIANS TODAY, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE OF LUTHER'S TEACHING. LUTHER LOOKED AT THE BIBLE AND SAW THAT WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH, NOT BY OUR WORKS. AND LUTHER ALSO WANTED TO ASSURE CHRISTIANS THAT IT WASN'T UP TO THEM TO CONJURE UP ENOUGH FAITH TO SAVE THEMSELVES.

I REMEMBER BEING IN MY CCD CLASS AS AN ELEMENTARY STUDENT AND THINKING THAT IF I BELIEVED IN GOD STRONGLY ENOUGH, I WOULD HAVE ENOUGH FAITH FOR GOD TO LIKE ME. I ALWAYS TRIED TO BE A GOOD GIRL BUT SOMETIMES I WAVERED. I WOULD GO TO CONFESSION AND CONFESS MY SINS TO THE PRIEST. DID THAT MEAN I DIDN'T REALLY HAVE TRUE FAITH? THERE WERE MOMENTS IT SCARED ME. I DIDN'T BELIEVE AS STRONGLY AS THE PRIESTS DID. I COULDN'T PRAY THE ROSARY LIKE MY GRANDMOTHER DID. BUT LUCKY FOR ME, I WAS ALWAYS INVITED TO MY BEST FRIEND'S CHURCH WHICH MEANT VACATION BIBLE STUDY! AND I LEARNED THAT MY FAITH WAS A GIFT FROM GOD. THAT MY FAITH WOULD GROW IN ME AS I GREW IN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST. HAVING FAITH MEANT LIVING ON A FIRM FOUNDATION EVEN WHEN I DOUBTED, OR WONDERED, WHEN I QUESTIONED AND WHEN I GREW. BUT ABOVE ALL ELSE, I LEARNED HAVING FAITH IS ITSELF A GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE.

ONE OF THE MAIN LESSONS OF THE REFORMATION IS THAT IT'S NOT OUR GOOD DEEDS THAT SET US FREE. AND IT'S NOT HAVING THE RIGHT IDEAS ABOUT GOD THAT SET US FREE. AND IT'S NOT MAKING UP ENOUGH FAITH OR CERTAINTY THAT SETS US FREE. IT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH CHRIST THAT SETS US FREE. ALL GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE.

THE FINAL GIFT OF THE REFORMATION THAT WE CELEBRATE TODAY IS THAT WE REMEMBER THE CHURCH IS ALWAYS REFORMING. THE CHURCH IS ALWAYS GROWING, ALWAYS BEING RENEWED, IN EVERY AGE TRANSFORMING INTO GOD'S VISION OF WHAT THE CHURCH

SHOULD BE NEXT. SO THE CHURCH IS NEVER STATIC. IN OUR NEXT CONFIRMATION CLASS THE STUDENTS WILL LEARN ABOUT MARTIN LUTHER AND WILL BE ASKED TO THINK ABOUT THE CHURCH IN OUR WORLD TODAY AND COME UP WITH THREE STATEMENTS ABOUT HOW THE CHURCH NEEDS TO CHANGE...TO REFORM. I WILL EAGER TO HEAR WHAT THEY SAY. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

WE ARE ALWAYS IN REFORMATION, JUST AS EACH OF US INDIVIDUALLY IS CONSTANTLY MATURING AND GROWING INTO FULLER EXPRESSIONS AS THE DAUGHTERS AND SONS OF GOD WE ARE CALLED TO BE. TODAY WE CELEBRATE THE GIFT OF NEW LIFE AND FREEDOM FOUND IN OUR BAPTISMS AS WE REMEMBER THE PROMISE WE ARE EACH SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH. THANKS BE TO GOD FOR SUCH AMAZING GRACE AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. AMEN.