

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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Reformation Sunday – October 25, 2020
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.” (Marty, Martin E., *October 31 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2016), 95.

Let me say that again, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.”

This is the first of Martin Luther’s Ninety-five theses that were said to have been posted on the door of the university chapel in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. This was done so that the people who would come to worship the next day on All Saints Day would see them and begin to discuss them.

What a beginning! But how are we to understand the proposition? Does it mean that we spend all our waking hours on our knees in prayer asking for forgiveness of our sin? Martin Marty, the renowned Lutheran scholar and pastor, suggests this approach in his book, *October 31 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World*, “Repentance, ...is a response to the promises of God, of grace. ... Think of repentance as a change of heart... .” (Ibid, 9.)

It’s our human hearts that are to change. Because God’s heart never changes – God’s always loving us and wanting us to be in mutually loving relationship with God, even when we are feeling the consequences of breaking that relationship with God. And, as Jeremiah tells us God has announced, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (34:33.)

That’s us God’s talking about. God’s hoping for the relationships that caused God to create humanity in the first place. God’s hoping for the relationships to exist and to flourish. God’s hoping that the relationships will nurture us, and will feed our relationships with other human beings.

So, what Jesus hoped for 2000 years ago when he addressed the believers in the temple (if we accept the explanation of the two Martins (Luther and Marty), a change of heart, is also what God hoped for 800 years before that when the word of God was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah.

We usually think of Reformation as an observance of the church – the institution – but what is the church, if not the people gathered? It's not a building, right? We teach this to the smallest children, but it's a community of people gathered. Gathered to be loved, and to love one another. Gathered to be nurtured and to nurture one another. Then, once we are infused with our identity as disciples of Christ, we, the people who are the church, are gathered to serve: yes, one another who are members of the community, but also to serve the rest of God's creation.

That's what Jesus was getting at when he spoke to the Jews who believed in him, gathered in the temple in Jerusalem. They had come from all over Judea and Israel to observe the feast of the Booths or Tabernacles (at about this very time of year), to commemorate their ancestors' wandering in the wilderness for forty years after they were freed from oppression in Egypt. Jesus taught:

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (8:31b-32.)

But these new believers “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’?’” (8:33.)

That conversation happened just a day after the end of the festival when they'd remembered their ancestors' wanderings, but now they seemed to have forgotten the generations in the wilderness, not to mention the years that those forebears had spent in slavery in Egypt, or the time they'd been in captivity in Babylon. They didn't even seem to be dealing with the fact that at that very time, they were not citizens of a free Judea or Israel, but they lived in a colony held captive by the Roman Empire. Their hearts were not dealing honestly with Jesus' teaching. Their hearts needed to change.

But Jesus wasn't concerned about the past. His focus was on the future of his people, so he responded:

“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (8:34-36.)

Jesus was talking about their relationships, those with God and those with one another. If they were practicing repentance, God would forgive them and they would be free of sin and would live righteously in relationship to God. And if they were practicing repentance, God would forgive them and they would be free of sin and would live justly in relationship to their fellow human beings.

Paul spoke about this, as well. He said in his letter to the home churches in Rome, as he was trying to unite the Jewish and Gentile Christians who were fighting with one another, so that they could live just as the body of Christ:

“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Romans 3:21-22.)

It is God’s love and forgiveness again that operates to bring us into community, with both God and one another. The Greek word Paul used in talking about the nature of the relationships Christians have with God and with one another, *dikaiosyne*, means both “justice” when it’s applied to human relationships, and “righteousness” when it’s applied to people’s relationships with God. (Patterson, Jane Lancaster, “Commentary on Romans 8:19-28,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4605. It describes two different aspects of relating when the disciples embody those relationships, with either God or their neighbors.

We Lutheran Christians live as embodied love (as Jesus did and taught us to do), and it is through God’s continuing love that we are renewed, reformed, remade to be God’s living love in the world. And being living love causes us to experience a change of heart.

“Reformation Sunday draws our attention to God’s ongoing work of renewal in the church, to the unmerited gift of divine grace that cannot be bought or sold, and to a history of courageous response to that free gift, embodied in reformers who have been willing to challenge abuses within the body of Christ.” Portier-Young,

Anathea, "Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34,"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4625.

So, we live in the work of continuing reformation in the present. How are we called to reformation in our personal lives and in our relationships? What are we called to do to reform our individual churches and the church at large? Are our communities and society in need of our work to reform them? Where is God's grace calling us to action? These are questions that we would do well to cope with this week to see if we have a change of heart.

Let's pray. "Lord, keep us steadfast in your word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done. Lord Jesus Christ, your power make known, for you are Lord of lords alone; defend your holy church, that we may sing your praise eternally. O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth; support us in our final strife and lead us out of death to life." "Lord, keep us steadfast in your word," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* No. 517. In the precious name of Jesus, we pray. C: Amen.