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Lesson: Reformation Sunday, Romans 3:19-28 & John 8:31-36

³¹Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They 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?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The church is always reforming. That is the emphasis behind Reformation Sunday. The church, at its best, is always reforming itself so that it can faithfully proclaim the grace of God in every time and every place. I realized this week how we at All Saints are embodying this concept of the church always reforming. Out of necessity we were able to pull together an outdoor service in less than a week. We literally borrowed electronic equipment from the neighbor of one of our members in order to make that happen. As time has gone on over seven months, we’ve adapted and figured out how our worship can best be done during a pandemic. Yet it’s not just about our worship, but we also have been figuring out how our outreach ministries in the broader community can be best done during this time, as well as our education and fellowship. That’s not to say these are our favorite methods nor is this always easy for us, but out of necessity we truly have been a reforming church striving to be faithful to God and our neighbor during this time.

The truth about being a constantly reforming church, however, is that we can never be satisfied that we’ve arrived. This involves continuous work and introspection. This

includes reminding ourselves that the call to always be a reforming church is not just about our worship, outreach, and whatnot. First and foremost, we are reforming so that our proclamation is always relevant. Like I said earlier, the church is at its best when it is always reforming itself so that it can faithfully proclaim the grace of God to people who need to hear this proclamation. But what is it? What is this grace? If grace is so central to our experience and central to our proclamation as the church, shouldn't we have a grasp of what it is? I'm not going to try to define God's grace for us because scripture doesn't give us a tidy definition. What scripture gives us are stories meant to shape our perceptions of how God has a relentless desire to show us love.

A good place to start out is hearing a story about a young couple who one day choose to eat some fruit. They were warned not to, but what's the big deal? So they eat it, they know they did wrong, and they go into hiding. God enters the scene and asks, "Where are you?" As if God needs to ask. They're hiding because they are naked and afraid. They are ashamed of their sin. Perhaps God asks the question because this couple needs to recognize that they literally have nothing to offer. What does God do? Does God destroy them for breaking the one rule of the garden? No. God clothes them. Not unlike how in baptism we find ourselves naked and sinful, with nothing on our side worth any bargaining power, yet God clothes us anyway with Christ. So right from the get-go, at the start of the Bible, we witness God showing love with no conditions to broken people. That is grace.

Years ago, a commercial was aired that caught a lot of people off guard. It consisted of short black and white videos of various people with scars on their bodies: a wrestler with a cauliflower ear, a runner with blistered and black toes, and even a rodeo cowboy with a mangled eye. A song is played in the background throughout these scenes of battered and broken people: {You are so beautiful to me.} Then, at the end, the words appear, "Just Do It." That commercial was heavily criticized. Many people argued it was one of the worst commercials that Nike had ever made, because its message was not readily apparent.

Disregarding whatever the company's intentions may have been, Christians can find some truth about God's grace in this brief commercial. Even though we are scarred by sin, even though we have wounds from the past, even though people can point to the mangled mess of our sinful lives, God relentlessly loves us and pursues us. God has no ulterior motive to this love. There are no conditions attached to receiving this love. We aren't even loved because we are worth loving. God does this simply because that is who God is. That is grace.

I was fresh out of college when I landed a job in a new town, where I knew no one. My first Sunday there, I went to the nearby Lutheran church for worship. The bulletin said that a men's Bible study took place early every Monday morning. The meeting wrapped up before I needed to report to work, so I figured I'd go the next morning and meet some other adults there. Looking back at that decision to go, I should have known that I'd be walking into a room where every single person but myself was retired. But they made a good cup of coffee, they improvised great jokes, and most importantly they welcomed me in. Months into this, there was one Monday morning I didn't want to go, but went anyway. A relationship that I thought would last had ended the night before. I just sat there, not saying a word as all the other men carried on. The one who sat next to me that morning was better known for delivering good punch lines than for delivering spiritual insights. Yet, while everyone else was yapping away, he leaned over to me and whispered, "God will not let go of you." Even in the dark storms of our lives, reminders of God's relentless love can be found. That is grace.

A disgruntled son says some nasty things to his father, and he wanders away from the family farm to start a new life elsewhere. Perhaps inevitably, he messes things up. He eventually finds himself with nowhere to turn. So he writes home saying that he'd soon be on the train that runs by the farm. If the father is willing to give him a chance to talk, then the father should tie a red ribbon around the trunk of the old oak tree near the tracks. That day arrives and the son finds himself anxiously sitting on the train. He can't bear the thought

of the oak having nothing tied around it. So before the train approaches the farm he asks another passenger to look out the window for a tree with a red ribbon tied around it. The train creeps along, and finally the fellow passenger nudges him and says, “Look, son.” Turning his head toward the window, the son sees a red ribbon tied to every last branch of that oak tree. That is our experience with God whenever we stray. Even when other people would say enough is enough, there is always more than enough love flowing from the heart of God for us. This tireless love of God is always an invitation to a new relationship. That is grace.

There is grace because at the very essence of the Father is overflowing love. There is grace because the Son takes our sins and our scars onto himself because his dogged love pours out from his heart. There is grace because the Holy Spirit gazes upon these scars of ours and with fervent love she fashions them into a beautiful new creation. It is unconditional, it is unwarranted, it is an outpouring of divine love for you. {“You are so beautiful to me.”} That, my siblings in Christ, is the grace that is central to our faith. We, the church, receive this grace not as a doctrine to be recited but as a gift to reshape lives. It is hard to grasp that. Yet that is why the church must constantly reform itself, so that we and others can better appreciate and experience this gift that makes all things new. God has a relentless habit of loving you, not because of who you are, not because of what you’ve done, and not because of what you will be. With your scarred and flawed self on full display, God loves you... simply because that is who God is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.