

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 8:31-36

³¹Then Jesus 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.

This week I received my twin daughters’ first report cards. All was good with them, but looking at these gave me pause. Now it all begins – the grading, the scoring, the pressure – and all of it eventually culminates in their graduation. Which brought to mind all the personal milestones they will experience in life. Not only the milestones they accomplish, but also the passive events – like a pandemic – that will shape their lives.

Let’s face it, though: life is never stagnant, and it seems to be one milestone after another. Every so often, major changes will occur in life, and whenever we speak of how God is active in our lives, we often will point to those major milestones: decisions, relationships, ups, and downs. It is easy to think that God works episodically: God showing up here, and later there, and even later over there in our journey of life. Even though that is often the easiest way to see our story, the truth is that God works throughout our journey of life. God is active even in the minutiae and the lulls. That is not to say that God is shaping every action and outcome, and it is definitely not to be understood as God is some type of weird lurker who keeps a tab on how many times we mess up. Instead, it is a belief that God

is present in life itself: the milestones and the mundane. God is constantly shaping and forming – or re-shaping and re-forming – who we are, to walk closer with the Divine.

Our scripture lessons today point to this reality. The prophet Jeremiah begins by saying, “The days are surely coming...” when God will put the law within the people, and God will write it on their hearts. Did you catch it? “The days are surely coming...” Jeremiah did not say, “One day is surely coming...” It is not a one-and-done deal. It is not as if God’s fingers snap and God is done writing on the hearts of the people. The days are surely coming when God does this work, the prophet says. God is up to ongoing work, not just a one-time reform. Similarly, the gospel text has Jesus saying, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” It is not, “If one day you find yourself in my word.” No. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” This is once again the ever-reforming of God’s people.

This year marks the 505th anniversary of Martin Luther’s start of the Protestant Reformation. There is a tendency on Reformation Sunday for Lutherans to look back to five centuries ago and proclaim to those forebears, “Way to go, everyone! You finally got it right at Wittenberg, and we applaud you!” You and I can appreciate the reforming work of Luther, Melancthon, and the others. What they did truly was radical and it reshaped the course of history. Yet we mustn’t fall into the trap of thinking they had everything figured out and all you and I have to do is to strive to be like them and to believe like them. We definitely don’t want to fall into the trap of thinking they are above criticism, because they definitely have their faults and failings. Yet they are known for their reforms to the Church, and all of western Christianity – the Roman Catholic Church included – has responded by seeking to be more faithful to the good news and ministry of Jesus.

During recent weeks the Thursday Morning Bible Study has been walking through a book called “How the Bible Actually Works.” The participants in the class as well as myself

are thoroughly enjoying it. One idea the book emphasizes is people's understanding of God. Across time, the book says, our ideas of God don't remain stagnant. Whether we recognize it or not, and whether we admit it or not, people are always taking their lived experiences, their context, and their language and they use them to frame their understanding of how it is that God is active in their own time. The book details how we can see that progression of thought taking place in the pages of scripture. Even since those pages were written, we can also see that progression taking place in history.

We tend to refer to "the Reformation" as a set of decades that took place centuries ago, the truth is that God is always seeking to reform us. God desires us to see, feel, and witness to the activity of the Divine in and around us. God is at work even in the lulls and minutiae of our lives. God loves you just the way you are. God knows you have a story, and God wants to work something breathtaking out of that story. Quite often God allows our stories to continue to unfold well after our deaths.

This past week I attended the South Carolina Synod's leader convocation at Lutheridge. It is a chance for the Lutheran pastors and deacons in South Carolina to reunite, socialize, and have some continuing education. The keynote speaker this year was Diana Butler Bass, who is a well-known church historian and the author of over a dozen books. She told the story of how she made a connection with another well-known author of books about Christian spirituality, John Philip Newell. Newell resides in Edinburgh, Scotland. When Diana made her initial contact with John Philip, it was to inform him that she had a trip arranged to his area and she would enjoy meeting with him while there. He was delighted with the idea, so they met over a meal. During the meal, he asked what else she had on her itinerary. She listed a few things, then she said, "I also plan to visit a church in [and she named a small community]. My ancestors worshiped there." John Philip Newell fell silent, and after a moment he said, "My ancestors worshiped there as well."

This community they spoke of is a small brick church in a rural area, and the congregation existed for over 800 years. In recent decades the congregation has closed, and now the building is only open for tours. Doctor Bass asked this week's attendees this question, "Did this congregation fail? It disbanded and no longer gathers there for worship, so many would be quick to call it a failure. Or can we understand – as Christians – that death and resurrection occurs in astonishing ways? For example, can we understand the people of that congregation have a story that lives on, because two of today's most well-known Christian scholars can trace their lineage to this small, rural, and easily overlooked community that praised God for over 800 years?"

God doesn't show up episodically in life. Rather, God re-shapes and re-forms us daily, whether we are experiencing major changes in life or we are not. God loves you as you are, and God wants to work out something amazing that is beyond your understanding and perhaps even beyond your own lifetime. That is what I find most powerful about what we proclaim on Reformation Sunday. It is that God still works through us, God still makes something new, and God still surprises us. God's activity is not stuck in the past, as though it were an old relic whose original splendor we can only imagine. No. You and I have the sacred responsibility to seek God's movement in our day. God loves us, moves us, reforms us, and God brings our stories to a beautiful completion. May we walk together, as disciples of Jesus, coming to see the truth that God is with us and God is working through us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.