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Lesson: Reformation Sunday – 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.”

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. When the church does that, it reveals a truth that can be difficult for us to swallow: because the church is constantly reforming, it must never think that it has arrived; that it is done reforming. On Reformation Sunday, we can easily place our focus on Martin Luther and the numerous others labeled as “reformers of the church,” because clearly what they did 500 or so years ago instigated this occasion we celebrate here today. However, focusing only on them can lead many people to conclude that the Christian church arrived at its destination 500 years ago, rather than challenge us to step up to the plate and be the church that the world today needs. That misplaced focus of today can also lead us to conclude that the only reformers of value in church history lived in western Europe 500 years ago, rather than help us see that there have been church reformers in every generation, across the globe, and in our own community.

The church is always reforming when people like you live into the grace of God. The church is always reforming when God’s grace burns within you, re-forms you, and empowers you to proclaim God’s abundant grace in your life. The church is always reforming, so that it can faithfully proclaim the grace of God to people who need to hear this good news. 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? Unfortunately, scripture doesn't give us a tidy definition. What scripture does instead is share stories that are supposed to shape our perceptions of how God has a relentless desire to love.

A good place to start out is hearing a story about a young couple. One day they choose to eat some fruit. Stop me if you've heard this one. This couple previously had been warned not to eat a particular tree's fruit, but "Eh... what's the big deal?" So they eat it, they figure out 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 themselves. Perhaps God asks the question because this couple needs to recognize that they literally have nothing to offer. No clothing, no valid excuses. At the time of the offense, they were solely focused on indulging themselves. And what does God do? Does God smite them with wrath for breaking the one rule of the garden? No. God clothes them. Not unlike how in baptism we find ourselves naked and ashamed, 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 to broken people. That is grace.

When I think of God's grace, I like to think of that Nike commercial years ago that was heavily criticized at the time. Clip by clip, the commercial shows a cast of characters: a wrestler with a cauliflower ear, a runner with blistered and black toes, a rodeo cowboy with a mangled eye, a surfer with the torso scars of a shark bite. The only audio found in this ad is a song: {You are so beautiful to me.} The critics of the commercial might not have understood its message, but Christians should certainly hear something familiar in it.

What about that time when the god of Jacob did something completely unexpected? Other nations of the ancient Near East told tales of gods who formed pacts with their kings. However, the god of Jacob does the unthinkable: this god creates a covenant with a wandering band of freed slaves. Not with a king, not even with the band's leader Moses; this god reaches out to the oppressed and gives them the beautiful gift of Torah, the law that will allow them – and all life – to prosper. That is grace. Then what do these people immediately do? They hastily craft a god out of gold.

Jacob's god is upset by this, of course. Rather than dealing harshly with the people, God gives them a new task: these disparate tribes will have to work together to craft not a golden calf, but craft a large tent – the Tabernacle – so that God could journey with them. It wouldn't be made of gold, but from whatever fabrics and resources they could muster in the desert. This act of giving the people the common goal of creating a Tabernacle ultimately created bonds among the tribes; God didn't smite the people, God formed them into a nation. That is grace. {You are so beautiful to me.}

My roommate during my freshman year of college was named Dave. Neither of us knew a soul on campus when we first moved into our room. We stuck together the first day and a half, but we really didn't know what to talk about. Then at lunch on that second day, we both exited the dining hall into the bright sunlight. At the same precise moment, we both sneezed, and then we began to laugh together, because we realized that we both have PSR, photic sneeze reflex. Besides our fathers, whom Dave and I inherited PSR from, neither of us had ever met anyone else who did this. Oddly enough, sneezing kicked off our friendship and opened the door to a bright future – figuratively – of shared experiences. However, at the start of our sophomore year, I messed things up. I was young, and in an awfully stupid moment I told someone else a personal detail about Dave, and it got back to him. Dave was rightfully angry, and he didn't speak to me for at least a year. The regret of ruining this friendship weighed on me, and I certainly learned my lesson. I forget why or how we started to speak again, but I remember Dave expressing that he longed to renew the relationship. I didn't deserve it, by any means, but Dave wanted to love me more than he wanted to be angry at me. That is grace.

There once was this guy who found himself surrounded by misfits and outcasts one day. The cool clique people were watching him from the periphery. "This separation won't do," he thought. So he told some stories to bring them all together. First came a story of a sheep who went astray and the shepherd who without abandon searched for it. Second, a story of a woman who misplaced a coin and, upon finding it, threw a party that cost way more than the value of the coin. He was trying to get through to the audience a message of God's love and grace, but those stories didn't seem to fully sink in, so the guy told a third story. There is a disgruntled son who 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 decides to return home, where he will submit himself to all the indignities that he rightfully deserved.

Astonishingly, though, as soon as he crests the ridge that overlooks the family farm, the father sprints to him. He embraces this son, and paying no attention to the excuses the boy is trying to spill, the father shouts commands to throw a party that is beyond compare. The older brother catches wind of it and refuses to join the celebration. The father reaches out to him, pleading with his eldest child to recognize what has happened and that the party must take place. Then Jesus gives a long look at the misfits, the outcasts, and to the cool clique people who are all listening to him. He wants them all to know that the party of God's grace is for them all, and that they should no longer separate themselves. {You are so beautiful to me.}

Even though we are scarred by sin; even though we have wounds from the past; even though we hesitate to join a party that includes neighbors who don't look like us, think like us, love like us, identify like us, speak like us, or pray like us; even though people can point to the mangled mess of our sinful and quite too often judgmental lives, God still relentlessly loves us and pursues us. God has a dogged love for you, even at your darkest moment. Standing there naked with our flaws and scars on full display, we are as vulnerable as that young couple who ate the fruit. But what God sees standing there is a beloved creation that makes the divine heart flutter. So God accepts you as you are and promises you more than you can imagine. 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 grace. It 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. God's relentless habit of loving you is not because of who you are, it is not because of what you've done, and it is not because of what you will be. God loves you... simply because that is who God is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.