

Reformation Sunday – October 26, 2025

John 8: 31-36, Luke 18:9-14

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. “If you continue in my word,” says Jesus, “you are truly my disciples.” Jesus spoke these opening words of our Gospel reading today not to his original group of Galilean disciples, but to some Judeans down in Judea who had listened to him and come to believe in him. But just like his original disciples, these new followers had a hard time catching on to the radical nature of what Jesus was up to. And I sympathize with those folks. It is not easy to grasp the word made flesh, the one who was with God from the creation of the world, the who was God and through whom all things were made, the one in whom is light that is life, life for all people. You probably caught that I’m referencing that famous prologue back in John’s first chapter. Jesus is working cosmic-level stuff while walking around like one of us. So no wonder it doesn’t come quickly or easily to mere mortals, including those who were with him the longest, and whom he entrusted with the mission of communicating his gospel to all people. They struggled early on to figure out how Gentiles could be heirs of God’s promises like the Jews were, and to discern what was essential for following Jesus and what was peripheral, or even contradictory in their old practices. Continuing in Jesus’ word is no small thing. It has been a challenge for the church throughout its history, from the very beginning right up until the present day.

Meeting that challenge is what the Reformation that we celebrate today was all about. And is all about. Because we’re not done reforming. Maybe you saw the sign on the way in: 508 years and still reforming. Reformation is an ongoing, never-ending process on this side of the grave. And ironically, we heirs of the Reformation have not always appreciated that. We have had a tendency to make this a day of patting ourselves on the back because *we* got it right. *We* reformed. Luther was right, the Catholic church was wrong and still needs reformation. And we are so glad that we are not like other people.

I’ve never been in a Lutheran church that didn’t celebrate the Reformation on the last Sunday of October, but it is an optional observance. And if we *had* opted out, we would have gotten for our Gospel reading the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector that I just alluded to. But it’s such a good text for making this point, that I’m going to read it for you right now. It’s only short:

Luke 18:9 [Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In celebrating the Reformation, we don’t want to emulate this Pharisee, so quick to focus on the sins of others that he misses his own, while at the same time being so preoccupied with celebrating his own achievements that he misses what God is doing.

And that is also what is happening to those Judean followers in our John reading. As Jesus elaborates on his teaching they feel threatened. Their identity is at stake. They don’t like being compared to slaves. That is humiliating. They pride themselves in being descendants of

Abraham, the one who followed God and who God made into a great nation. They are conveniently remembering the beginning of the Abraham story, but not how it played out even in Abraham's lifetime, not to mention in their people's subsequent captivity in Egypt, or their failure as a nation to live faithfully toward God or toward one another that resulted in conquest and exile. Their identity is wrapped up in a whitewashed version of their national history that has no place for nuance, complication, or criticism. And they are far from alone in this. They are manifesting a universal characteristic of all tribes and nations of every time and every place, our own included.

The lectionary folks gave us a mic-drop moment to end our Gospel reading: "If the Son makes you free you will be free indeed." But that's not actually where the conversation ends. Right after that Jesus says, "I *know* that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word." That is devastating. No wonder the lectionary folks didn't include it. It opens up a whole can of worms that we'd rather not get into. We do the same with the Nicodemus story, preferring to end it at that famous verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We do *not* like continuing to verse 19 where Jesus tells us that "the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

And yet, what makes the Reformation the Reformation, what opened Luther's eyes and heart and sparked a sweeping reform movement was precisely coming to grips with these uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our world, facing up to what Paul tells us in our second reading from Romans, that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We come to grips with these truths first by acknowledging them, which isn't always easy to do. I saw a cartoon this week that was a twist on the famous Trolley Problem. You're familiar with that, right? There is a loose trolley, barreling down the track, and there are five people on the track ahead. But there is a switch before the people, and you are standing at it. You can throw the switch and divert the trolley onto a side track, but on that track there is one person. What do you do? Sound easy, but there are ways of complicating the decision that I won't go into. Okay, you've got the idea. The cartoon I saw had only one track with a continuous line of people bound to the track, some of them already run over, and a person at a switch. And the caption was this: "You can stop the trolley at any time, but in doing so you need to admit that you made a mistake."

What Jesus is saying in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in his encounter in our Gospel reading with his wavering Judean followers, and in that uncomfortable follow-up to John 3:16 is that we don't want pay that price to stop the trolley. We are too invested in our identities and our self-justifying to throw that switch. But he will not leave us in that terrible situation. He will not abandon us to our pride and indifference to others, and will not let our love of the darkness be the last word. On the cross he will take the full brunt of the trolley upon himself. And in doing so he will undo the power of the sin, death, and evil that trolley carries. The gospel is the good news the he has done this for us and for our salvation. And not only for us. But it is also the promise that we are freed from captivity to the lies we tell ourselves through our selfish, manufactured identities, in our pride and arrogance, and in our indifference to others. We are freed from all of that by God's grace, and that alone. And our hearts are changed, turned toward God, to our fellow human beings, and to God's good creation, freed to love and serve in newness of life.

Now that is something to celebrate! And as we celebrate that glorious good news, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.