

Homilies for the Reformation Hymn Festival
at Augustana Lutheran Church, Denver, CO

Re•Formation: Then, Now, Always

29 October 2017

THEN: Grace – the disruptive gift of God

Ephesians 2:4-10

Grace ... if there is a classic theological concept that drove Luther's reforming movement 500 years ago, if there is a core value at heart of our Lutheran way of being Christian, it is here: grace. Grace, that free gift of God's saving, unconditional, unmerited, unfettered love. Grace – the divine initiative that embraces us, sinners though we are, before we could possibly fathom what our embrace of God might mean for our lives and for the world. Grace – God's insistence on loving all of who we are, especially that shadow part we consider unworthy of love. Grace – God's insistence on loving every person, especially those we have deemed as "God-forsaken". Grace – the game-changing gift that expands to every possible margin, that finds its way to every lowest place, there to pool in sacred abundance.

Grace – it is everything. And if we take it seriously, it turns everything upside down.

Certainly, that was true for Martin Luther's own life. It was his Spirit-led discovery of God's grace for him that turned his life upside down, moving him from preoccupation with his own sin to a life framed by God's goodness and mercy that then freed him to serve the neighbor in joy. True, it wasn't this particular Scripture we just read that sparked Luther's inner re-formation – that would have been Romans 1:17 – but the key insight – that God loves first, last and always – that Christ is the sure and certain sign of that grace-filled love – that the Spirit is ever at work to stir up within us the faith by which this grace becomes comprehensible – this was the good news that upended Luther, threw the church of the day into turmoil, and completely disrupted all of Christian Europe at that time.

Grace – God's disturbing, disruptive insistence on loving us. It turned things upside down then. And so it has done ever since.

We have tried our best over the centuries to qualify this unqualified gift. We've hemmed and hawed, said our share of, "Yes, of course grace – but ..." And yet the truth is that grace always comes to us without any "buts". Which is hard for us. Because to live in the fullness of God's amazing grace – to let grace be grace, to let God be God – to allow God to love us because that's what God does, this means we lose control. And if there's one thing we can't bear, it's to lose control: control of our own self-judgment; lose control of our judgment of others.

To think that God chooses to love us not because of what we've done or not done, that God loves us regardless of how we may measure up to others – that turns all our notions of what is fair, or right, or deserved on its head. Which is precisely the point. Grace is not about what is fair or right or deserved. Grace is about the way God is.

It seems that the mystics and contemplatives of this world have gotten this far more quickly than the rest of us – perhaps because they have realized that grace is first and foremost an experience, not a concept. They have understood: left up to us, grace would not be grace at all. And so, our primary invitation each and every day is not to think about God's grace but to simply sit in it, dwell in its beauty and fullness, soak it up as it comes to us in Water and Word, Bread and Wine, as it is poured out again in the abundance of this very moment.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Let grace be grace, beloved; and give thanks and praise as once again God's first and last word of love does its re-forming work in you, in me, in all of God's precious world ...

NOW: Christ's Body – God's both/and people

Romans 12:2-5, 14-18

We, who are many, are one body in Christ.

Let's not kid ourselves, this way of framing things is not going to get you very far in our "us vs them", "with me or against me", "my tribe is better than your tribe", "my country first" sort of world. Paul's mind-renewing vision for community that comes as part of our life in Christ – this vision of community in which our God-given diversity, individually and globally, becomes a gift and the source of a holy interdependence that does not pit one people against others – this is not only counter-cultural, it is potentially dangerous. It can get you accused of a lack of loyalty for "your own", it can get you booted off the island. Clearly, there is a cost to being part of God's both/and people in this either/or world.

And yet look where our insistence on either/or has gotten us: war and bloodshed across the globe, deep divisions in this nation, suspicion and rejection before we even speak with one another, an inability to find a common language to share our identity and values. The world of either/or is not a pretty one. Nor is it hopeful. Either/or thinking and living is responsible for those very headlines we dread to encounter every time we wake to a new day. Our either/or living has relegated some of our beloved sisters and brothers to perpetual life on the margins and kept those of us in places and positions of advantage from recognizing our own privilege and the impact our privilege has on our neighbors.

Now more than ever our call to be Christ's Church, to model what Martin Luther King Jr called the beloved community, now more than ever, this matters. If we in the church cannot demonstrate the beauty of God's both/and, where will it be learned? If we, as disciples of a Lord who crossed every barrier and boundary for the sake of beloved community, if we cannot bridge the divides, love the stranger and outcast, embrace one another in our wonderful diversity, who do we expect to lead the way?

So how do we get there? It begins by holding one another accountable to the life that is born in us through God's own grace, a life that is re-formed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul describes the quality of our re-formed way of living in this either/or world:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Can't be done, you say? But look, it's already here. Not perfectly, of course. But where else do you see people of all tribes and nations, from all walks and stations of life, those holding a diversity of opinions and perspectives, those from the margins and places of privilege ... where else do you see such a diverse cross-section of community gathered together for prayer and praise, washed in the very same baptismal waters, joined around the same Table to share a meal of grace, sent together as God's ambassadors of reconciliation into the world?

We, who are many, are one body in Christ.

There is no better time than now to claim that holy truth.

ALWAYS – The cross – God's foolishness

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

If you wanted to be part of an award-winning religion, the last thing you would place front and center is a cross. After all, a cross is what ...? An ancient instrument for the torture and execution of criminals! Hardly says “winner’s circle” unless you’re the one doing the executing of a well-deserving criminal – which we all know is not the case in our Christian story. I find it ironic that we in the church are so hung up on measures for “success”, so afraid of failing or dying, when the central symbol for our faith is one of utter disaster and defeat. Ironic indeed.

True, the cross in our particular tradition is usually empty – a reminder that the crucified Jesus has been raised from death. And yet if Martin Luther reclaimed anything in the church of his day – a church whose life had become increasingly triumphalistic, whose glory was literally being built on the backs of those reminded regularly of their unworthiness – if Luther reclaimed anything in the church of his day it was the place of the cross in revealing to us exactly how and where God shows up in our lives. The cross is our sure and certain sign that far from being absent in the midst of our human pain and suffering and brokenness – God in Christ has come to dwell specifically in those very places we have been told God’s presence is not possible. Talk about a word of salvation!

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

To think that God operates on the basis of some divine rewards and punishment system, that God is the cosmic Santa Claus who knows when you’ve been bad or good and then doles out your payment accordingly, this is very message under which far too many perish in this world. Because who can measure up? No one! Not you, not me. No one! No wonder the cross seems utterly unbelievable, sheer foolishness to those perishing under the judgment of a Santa Claus God.

But if indeed the cross means “God with us”, if the cross is our assurance of God’s inexplicable power to bring light from darkness, hope from despair, life from death – then the cross is exactly what we need to be saved from our own self-imposed condemnation.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

I wonder how long it will take us as members of Christ’s Church in 21st century North America to let go of our insistence on “success” and to follow Jesus in the way

of the cross? When will we look to the Table that is set before us every time we gather and see there not a breakfast of champions but a meal to which beggars invite other beggars, so that together we might dine with reckless abandon on the very grace of God as guests of a crucified Lord?

The truth is that the cross is always likely to trip us up because the cross will always point us to a power made perfect in weakness, to a wisdom that seems the height of foolishness. The cross will always trip us up until that moment when we find ourselves in the heartache of life, in that place we believe God can not possible visit. And when the love of the crucified Jesus embraces us there – then we will know in heart, mind and body the truth that the cross is here to proclaim for all time: that nothing – nothing – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Then will the power and wisdom of the cross truly renew and re-form us for our life in this world.

Not long ago I was reminded of the powerful words of this hymn by Spanish priest José Antonio Olivar, words that point to the very heart of the paradox of the cross:

When the poor ones who have nothing still are giving,
When the thirsty pass the cup water to share,
When the wounded offer other strength and healing;
We see God, here by our side, walking our way.
We see God, here by our side, walking our way.

Thanks be to God for this foolishness of the cross!