

Reformation/Homecoming Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In today's gospel reading, those whom Jesus spoke to in the temple were quickly offended and responded much like an entitled child. They said, "Do you know who you're talking to? *We* are Abraham's children, and we were never slaves." But, Jesus knows that this response is from the book of "alternative facts." The truth is that Abraham's children were enslaved a number of times. The most well-known time was by the Egyptians. Their freedom came from God after Moses led the exodus, which included plagues, the Passover, and a pillar fire. It is *the* central story of Judaism, and so, it's a little odd that those gathered in the temple weren't aware. And, Jesus could have gone on to mention their long history of being ruled by the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. He could've pointed to their current occupation by Rome. But, Jesus knew that sometimes truth is suppressed, ignored, or forgotten.

This points to a human characteristic that we fail embrace - namely, that we forget. We often forget. We forget that when we selfishly make things about ourselves we become bound to our own self-interests. We forget that the smiling faces of social media only make us feel more depressed. We forget that we are servants to our smartphones that drag us down with endless notifications. We forget that our own political partisanship has led us to demonize "the other" and is making us zombies of group-think while letting hate and fear run our nation. Time and again, the expectations for us to be an idyllic employee, child, spouse, and citizen take what freedom we think we have and bind us to the irrational.

Two weeks ago, a group of church members attended a workshop called Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism. We spent days peeling back the veil on the history of the colonialism, genocide, enslavement, xenophobia, criminalization, and commodification of people of color in this country. We learned about declarations by the pope that made land occupied by non-Christian indigenous peoples ripe for the taking. We discovered that citizenship in this country from the beginning was *only* for free white people of good moral character.¹ We heard court case after court case that legally defined who was excluded from the white race and thus, all the privileges that come from the designation. Many of us were floored by how much we weren't taught or that was generally "forgotten" in our collective history. Toward the end of the final day, the facilitators checked in with all of us and asked us how we felt. A woman of color stood in the back of the room and said "relieved." Shocked faces turned toward her wondering if she had misunderstood the past two days. But, the black woman went on to say that she was relieved to know that the system is stacked against her. She's relieved to know that it wasn't all on her; rather, decisions had been made over hundreds of years that specifically exclude, other, and demonize her, and now, she can see that she's caught.

One thing that woman realized is that we often think we have control. We think that freedom is synonymous with having a plurality of choices and that we can control our own destiny. But, I think, Jesus's understanding of freedom from today's gospel calls out that untruth. For, in knowing that there is no choice, there is a freedom. That is, in knowing that you're not really going to overcome hundreds of years of odds stacked against you, you don't need to bear the world on your shoulders. So too, Jesus argued that we have no choice in God's love. Or, as my childhood

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalization_Act_of_1790

pastor says, “no matter who you are, what you’ve done, who you’ve done it with, or how often you’ve done it,” you are loved by God. And in that love, you have no choice.

That woman in our workshop found herself in a different place than we find ourselves with God. Yet, in both cases, our actions seemingly have little impact. So, what do you do when it feels like there is nothing you can do? Well, legend has it that Martin Luther said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” That is, even if nothing could be done to save tomorrow, he’d still do God’s work today. Knowing that God loves you no matter what frees you to share God’s love with others. You’re freed from the need to seek power, success, and status. You’re freed from the mind games that have no end game. In your state of being, you’re freed to live out your baptismal identity by making one small movement towards God’s justice and peace.

So, we can do small things in our community. We can reach out to our Jewish friends following yesterday’s massacre and give them our support. We can put a few solar panels on our roof to produce clean energy. We can be honest about the anti-Semitic writing by our founder, Martin Luther, and we can strongly condemn their use to terrorize in Christ’s name. We can vote for people and policies that protect God’s creation and support justice for all people. We can get to know our neighbors, and we can love the person that is hard to love. With each small action we can more fully live into our baptismal calling.

That’s what we celebrate on this Reformation Sunday. We come to recognize the imperfections of our faith, and to acknowledge that we can’t change everything, but we can do something to share God’s love. We celebrate our God who gives us a new understanding of freedom. We honor our God who doesn’t wait for us to accept God’s love, but shares it whether we want it or not. For in this gift, we are free indeed. Amen.