

Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Romans 3: 19-28
John 8: 31-36

The Truth That Makes Us Free
October 29, 2017 – Reformation Sunday
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About twenty years ago, there was a slang expression going around. People (one of them was my son Will) would say “word” or “word up.” I might say “Wow, this weather has been really cold and wet lately,” and Will would reply, “Word.” He meant to say, “I comprehend what you are saying and verify that your statement is true, my good mother.” Word up.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, 500 years into the Reformation era, I am thinking a lot about words, the Word, and the words within the Word. In other words, I think about how we read our sacred Scriptures, and how we behave because them: how we make those words live. And, I sometimes think about all the harm that misunderstanding of Scripture has done.

Let’s choose one word: sin. Often we use its plural – sins – to describe bad things done by a person or people. But in Scripture, for instance in Jeremiah’s prophecies or Paul’s letters, sin is not so much an action as a force. It is the power that robs the children of God of the abundant life that God offers; it is a condition in which we seem to be trapped. You might say that it is a state of profound insecurity, an anxiety that one is not sufficient or safe or worthy of love. It feels like alienation, at times, or isolation.

What if, with this distinction between sin and sins, we test out a theory: that sin (singular, a condition or even a force of insecurity and alienation) leads to sins (plural, actions that harm)? I am trying not to sound too “therapeutic” here, and say that people who are down on themselves tend to act out and are down on others, but let’s look at some examples.

We’ll start with “original sin,” as in the story of Adam and Eve, the supposed birthplace of human disobedience and separation from God. The tempter is able to play on the imaginations of Adam and Eve, a feeling of “original insecurity” about their relationship with God. They come to believe that God has not shared with them all they need to know, but withheld this special fruit that would give them knowledge. So, fueled by that sense of anxious need, they try to set themselves up, apart from God’s grace, as having knowledge and power of their own. The sin of imagined inadequacy leads to the sins of disobedience, and they eat that fruit. And then they hide from God. At least, that’s one way of looking at that old, old story of the human condition.

Why would all this matter to us, now? When someone does something wrong and sins -that is, the action – what can we do in response? We can either punish or forgive. But so often, either response leaves the person unchanged as to their condition: they are still stuck, still likely to act out feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. They need the kind of internal change that can only be worked by the gift of love. Love has a way of healing the plague of uncertainty and anxiety and unworthiness and creating a new person with a new heart. Jeremiah speaks of this, as a hope for the future, when he speaks of a new covenant with the people of Israel, when the law will be engraved on their hearts. They will know God intimately, and God will “forget” their sin: it will no longer be

a factor, or a force, or a compulsive driver of their actions. When a person feels completely loved and accepted in their heart, worthy of dignity and respect, confident that they have all the respect they need – I believe that they are much less tempted to harm “their life, the lives of others, and the life of the world” as our prayer of confession says.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we remember Martin Luther’s breakthrough moment, when he realized that all his attempts, his hard work, not to commit sins (plural) was just a sort of hamster wheel of anxiety and guilt. All his avoidance of sinning did not bring him peace, or make him feel close to God. In fact, he said, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience...I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners.” In earnest study of the Paul’s letter to the Romans, he came to see that focusing on individual sins and his own powers of resistance was futile, and in fact, counterproductive.

Paul describes the human condition and God’s response. No one can create self-worth alone, no one can totally justify themselves through their own powers, and we often harm each other in trying. Since we are always feeling this unstable footing, so to speak, of insecurity, we compare ourselves to each other, seeking to rise by stepping on the backs of others. It just doesn’t work, and God loves us too much to allow us to “earn” justification by our own selfish and imperfect means. Once again, neither punishment nor forgiveness can change our behavior, because we revert to our default attempts at self-justification. After demonstrating that our “works” are insufficient (Paul calls this “the law”) God instead breaks these cycles by showering us with grace, adopting us, so to speak, as worthy and beloved children. So, Luther began to teach, salvation by grace alone. Word. Word up.

Our Gospel reading for this Sunday gives us a conversation of Jesus and some Jews who were predisposed to accept his teachings. As with many conversations of people with Jesus, there is a peculiar attempt at self-justification going on that stems from both insecurity and self-delusion. Jesus says, “If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Jesus offers freedom. In response, even these sympathetic followers seem to be made insecure by the implication that they are not free. They justify themselves by declaring that they don’t need Jesus’ freedom because they have never been slaves. They are conveniently forgetting Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and all the other empires that enslaved them...not to mention the spiritual bondage to idolatry, injustice, and violence that has plagued their entire history. They are driven to grasp the false sense of self that says, “We have never been slaves to anyone!” That is how they maintained the shaky scaffolding that holds together their flimsy self-worth.

Here is where we can connect with our ancestors in faith. When we look honestly at ourselves, we see how we so often try to justify ourselves. We are grateful to Martin Luther for pointing this out...though I am not sure we have improved much over the last 500 years. We don’t need to think only in strictly theological or religious categories, about attempts to reach heaven or eternal salvation through our own means. But think about this self-justification or “justification by works” as our attempts to go it alone, to be self-sufficient, to claw out a place in a threatening universe with our own bare hands, our own shouts of self-righteousness.

Back in the day, people acted this out in various ways. In the first century it might have been observing the law strictly but without compassion, ignoring the heart of the law. In the time of

the Reformation, it might have been using religion as a way to guarantee a place in heaven, and consign everyone who disagreed to hell. Today it might be acquisitiveness, grasping enough wealth or status to create the illusion of worthiness, the illusion of a meaningful life. In each era, the temptation, born out of deep insecurity, is to craft a sense of self totally independent of God and our fellow human beings.

Here is what I notice as a particular expression of sin in our own time. It is the inability to apologize. Or, if a person does apologize, more airtime is given to justifying one's behavior than to the actual apology. Basically, it ends up sounding like, "I am sorry I did that, but let me explain why I had to do that to you." Guess what? To the person receiving the apology, it does not sound very real. I am particularly struck by the rash of incidents of sexual harassment that are blared across the news media. How often do we hear what sounds like a sincere admission of fault on the part of the harasser? Lawyers are hired, women are discredited, it's the fault of the situation or the business, or the clothing, or it's just the way men like to talk or whatever. All of that bad behavior and all that self-justification to hide what is, at the root, a lack of character and self-knowledge. Neither punishment or forgiveness creates any change. Only the truth, the truth acknowledged deep down in their bones, the truth of their own pain and insufficiency, only the truth will set them free. Word. Word up.

So, eventually all the attempts to build ourselves up through acquisition or self justification fail. No matter how much wealth I have, I can't buy love. (I think the Beatles told us that long ago.) No matter how hard I work, or how many awards I win, or how much I volunteer, I will not make it on my own. No matter how many people I take advantage of, I can't make them love me. But our common sinful state of existential insecurity and lack of trust leads us to buy into the mentality that we really can make all these happen, if we just work at it.

When Jesus taught 2000 years ago, he was trying to show his disciples another way. He called it continuing in his word. He called it freedom. He gave them the picture of someone who was enslaved by sin – by that condition of servitude to our false self, that attitude of grasping insecurity. Then he says that the child in the household is different. They are loved completely, and loved as they are and who they are. They do not earn this love. It is always there, freely offered. They can trust this love, in perfect freedom and peace. It transcends even death, so Jesus calls it eternal life. It is pure gift...if we only knew how to open hearts and hands to it.

The Gospel that sparked the Reformation and still can animate us today can be spoken in relative few words: God knows us – even our insecure attempts to justify ourselves through our words, work, accomplishments, wealth, or status – better even than we know ourselves. But God also loves us, accepting and loving the insecure, wayward persons we are. Not the person we've tried to be or promised to but, but the person we really are. God not only forgives us those sins (plural) we commit, but also promises us God's unconditional love, acceptance, and regard. This gift of grace and love both puts to death our attempts to justify ourselves (sin, singular) and raises us to a new way of living.

Well maybe that's more than a few words ☺ How about if I just say, "God knows you and is on your side." That's the truth that can set you free. Word and word up. Or, as we sometimes say, Amen.