

Sermon for Sunday, October 27, 2019

OUR SPIRITUAL CLAN

My maternal grandfather was born in Scotland and was a member of the Glindinning clan. When he was a teenager, he left Glasgow and joined the team of laborers that laid the first transcontinental cable under the Atlantic Ocean. He ended up staying in Chicago, where he joined a Lutheran Choir and met my Norwegian born grandmother. When I was growing up, I never heard much about my Scottish heritage – it was the Norwegian story and food and customs that my mother passed down to me. This past week I did a bit of research, and discovered that the Glindinning clan were not very nice people – many of them were thieves and land robbers and rogues. No wonder my mother took little pride in her Scottish roots!

Nonetheless, on this Reformation Sunday, I am glad to own my Scottish blood – because the reformed foundation of American Presbyterianism comes straight from that formidable Scotsman John Knox. And if truth be told, sin is as much a part of our Reformation story as is the pride of bagpiping Presbyterians.

As we all know, John Calvin is the Reformer most responsible for the theology that shapes the Presbyterian soul. And central to his theology of grace is his theology of sin. Calvin reminds us that there is no clan or race or economic distinction when it comes to sin. We are all in it together. And to underscore his point, Calvin describes our fallenness as total depravity – a doctrine that is scorned and ignored in our modern feel good world.

Well, just so you know, I fully embrace the idea of human depravity – of the propensity for we human beings to be greedy and selfish and dishonest and cowardly and narcissistic. There are moments when my own soul is depressingly depraved. BUT, where I differ with Calvin is in the concept of TOTAL depravity. Rather than being born with original sin, I believe we are born with original blessing – the potential to be fully the image of God – the image of good – in the world. And so, we live our lives torn apart by conflicting instincts – the desire to be good – versus the temptation to be selfish. Which is what our gospel lesson is all about today.

Both of the men in this story are sinners. The tax collector is of course a pariah in society, a lacky of the Roman empire – part of a system of government greed where the rich take from the poor. But what about the Pharisee – this pious religious leader who says and does everything right according to religious law and tradition? What is his sin? It is, of course, his self-righteousness – his pride in his holy achievements – his superior stature as one who is good at God.

And so both the tax collector and the Pharisee are sinners – but only the tax collector is set free – reconnected to God and his best self. Why? Because, unlike the Pharisee stuck on his own achievements and importance, the tax collector is humble – he admits his imperfection – he admits his total dependence on God's mercy – he trusts – not in his own power and prestige – but in the power of God to make all things new. Yes, the tax collector may be a rogue – like those Glindinning relatives of mine – but he is a redeemed rogue, ready to be God's image in a new way. Which is the story of the Reformation in a nutshell.

We know that Martin Luther was a somewhat neurotic, self-loathing priest, teaching and writing in Wittenburg Germany in the early 16th century. Like the tax collector in our Gospel story, Luther was filled with a kind of self-loathing – constantly berating himself and punishing himself and subjecting himself to rigid spiritual disciplines. And then one day, in what is called the Tower experience, he opened up his Bible and read these words: *For by grace, you have been saved through faith and this is not your doing, it is the gift of God.* (Ephesians 2:8)

Really? You mean what we do or achieve or make happen doesn't save us? You mean the hours Luther spent on his knees praying – the anguished feelings of guilt and unworthiness that filled his soul – you mean that none of that is necessary? You mean trusting and yearning for God's grace is all that we need to be free and whole?

Whatever happened in that tower that day changed Luther's life, and then changed the world. He fell in love with himself – he rejected the rigidity of the priesthood – and his guilt was transformed into a joy and a lust for life. He soon embraced a new way of living – marrying the delightful Katherine von Bora and together they produced 15 children! Luther also began writing some great hymns – many of them based on tunes that he first heard in the local tavern.

Of course, this transformation within his own life was the catalyst for the transformation that overtook the Christian church. When Luther realized that he could not work himself out of sin – but could only breathe new life through the free gift of God's grace – he also realized that the institution of the church had fallen prey to the same kind of folly. Rather than following Jesus in simple and grace-filled ways, 16th century believers were forced to obey the human authority of the church – earning salvation through mandatory rituals of prayer and confession, and paying exorbitant financial indulgences to make sure that their prayers were answered. All this did was to keep the church members powerless. And so, the church had become a corrupt institution – caring more about gilded ceilings and rich robes and the superiority complex of the priests, rather than about being the body of Christ's love and justice in the world.

And so, what Luther learned about grace and forgiveness and transformation in his own life – he applied to the brokenness and ineffectiveness of the church. When he nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the churches in Wittenburg on October 31st, 1517, he launched a movement that gave power to the people, that focused on each of us as ministers and channels of God's love. Yes, he lifted up the words of grace in scripture instead of the rigid teachings of the church. And through the growing protests of the Protestants across Europe and around the world, the church humbled herself, and was given the energy and the vision to become yeast and salt and light, giving hope and nourishment to a fallen world.

Fast forward to 2019 in these hallowed halls of Ladue Chapel. As we look at our own life together – and at the life of Protestant churches everywhere – it appears that a new reformation is in the making. The institutional church in America is stuck in many ways. Our biggest concerns have become survival issues – buildings and endowments and membership statistics – rather than the mission and the call that founded the church in the first place.

20 years ago, a man named Rodger Nishioka, interviewed and surveyed over 250 young adults who once had been confirmed in a Presbyterian church but have left the church behind. He asked them what would need to change for them to consider coming back. And like Luther's critique of the institutional church, these young adults point to ways we can reform our structures and life together – so that God has room to make all things new.

Basically, these young adults told Rodger that they are looking for four qualities in a spiritual community:

1) Hospitality – a warm welcome to EVERYONE – black, yellow, white, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, disabled – those who wear jeans and port tattoos, as well as those who wear Talbots and Brooks Brothers. And welcome does not just mean saying hello – it means welcoming ideas, opinions, experiences that are new and different.

2) Authenticity – Can I be real in this place? Is the pastor down to earth and emotionally accessible? Is this a place where we talk about what really matters in the world and our lives? Can we talk about politics and social change and sex and depression and addiction and family trauma? Can we admit failure and find forgiveness and hope and new life in this place?

3) Participation – Is this a place where my gifts will be recognized and used? Is worship participatory – where I can feel and see and touch and hear and smell God – a place where my heart as well as my head is nourished? Is this a place where everyone in the pew is an actor in the drama of worship – and not just a passive observer locked inside an individual silo?

4) Jesus – Whether they are theologically conservative or progressive or somewhere in between – young people are hungry for Jesus. Who is this radical rabbi whose teaching transformed the politics of his day? What does it mean to follow Jesus in today's divided and materialistic world? How can I find Jesus in my heart, and how can I find the courage to defy the ways of the world in order to embody the ways of love?

HOSPITALITY AUTHENTICITY PARTICIPATION JESUS

I think if we nailed these four spiritual qualities to the doors of our churches today, we might well experience a new reformation – an in pouring of God's grace – helping us to do and become what we cannot achieve on our own.

Shortly we will begin the Call of the Clans, celebrating the Scottish Reformation and the roots of many of our families of faith. But let us not forget that we ALL belong to the Spiritual Clan of Jesus – inheritors of the grace and forgiveness and promise of our Risen Lord. Our spiritual tartan is not plaid – but the plain white blessing of our baptismal robe. And our crest is the simple cry of the reformation – sola gratia – grace alone.

Thanks be to God that we don't need to save ourselves! God has already done it!

May it be so. Amen.

A sermon preached by Susan R. Andrews

October 27, 2019

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Texts: Joel 2:23-32 and Luke 18:9-14