

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Reformation

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28

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“What REALLY happened to Luther”

“Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...

Thus a furious battle raged within my perplexed conscience,

*but meanwhile I was knocking at the door of this particular Pauline passage,
earnestly seeking to know the mind of the great apostle.*

Day and night I tried to meditate upon the significance of these words... “The righteous shall live by faith.”

*[After years of much prayer, meditation, and struggle] God finally had mercy on me,
and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is a gift....*

Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise!

In the same moment the face of the whole of Scripture became apparent to me!

...This passage from Paul became to me the very gate to Paradise.”

[<https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/luthers-breakthrough-romans/>]

There is something that I believe we as Lutherans have missed.

We've grabbed hold of the words without understanding their meaning.

We've held onto the signpost instead of following to where it points.

We've stopped and stayed on the stepping stone that was simply the last stone

before Luther stepped into paradise, into the kingdom, into the very presence of the living God.

We've made it all about a theological concept, an idea, an interpretation of the phrase,

“justification by grace through faith”.

We've seen that phrase as the destination, the culmination, the celebration
of Luther finally getting it right

so that if we just hold onto his coat tails, we can slide into Paradise with him.

But you see, for Luther, it wasn't simply a new idea or a new insight or a new understanding.

It wasn't a destination or a culmination.

It wasn't Paradise itself.

It was simply the gateway that he found to Paradise,

that holy place where he encountered the living God.

And in that instant his entire life – his heart and soul and mind and body –

were completely and forever transformed by Grace, by Love,

by the Power, the Force behind all things.

We Lutherans have made it about the gateway to Paradise –

we've made it about an intellectual, philosophical, theological proposition.

But intellectual, philosophical, theological propositions do not change minds or hearts or lives.

They don't change individuals or groups or organizations and they certainly don't change the world.

What changes hearts and minds and lives, what changes individuals, and the church, and the world, isn't an idea

but an experience, an experience that changes who you are and who you know God to be

and how you see the world and the role God has called you to play in it.

And that's what we've missed.

We've kept hold of Luther's words about grace,

not understanding that they were simply the wrapping paper for the actual gift of grace

that cannot simply be understood by the mind,

but must also be felt by the heart and experienced by the spirit.

That is what our first lesson tries to explain.

It's what our first reading this morning tries to explain.

"The days are surely coming, says the LORD,

when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt....

But this is the covenant that I will make....

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;

and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD",

for they shall all know me...."

Luther had spent his whole life trying to please God.

To the great disappointment of his parents, he had given up his plans to become a lawyer to become a priest.

With that decision he gave up any hope of a wife or children, simply because he wanted to please God.

He tried to be the best priest he could be.

He not only studied God's Word, he dedicated his life to teaching it.

He worshipped and sang and prayed and confessed and studied and taught and worked every day.

His knew the Bible backwards and forwards and could quote much of scripture from memory.

Everything he did was designed to demonstrate his love for God and his commitment to God

But none of it was enough.

Luther was living under the old covenant –

a covenant of words, taught to him, received by him, accepted by him.

I'm sure that if you added up what every one of us knows about scripture,

it wouldn't be as much as Luther knew.

I'm sure that if you added up every minute we spent in prayer and worship and Bible study,

it wouldn't be as many as Luther had spent in those activities.

But none of his knowledge was enough.

He KNEW ALL ABOUT God. But he did not KNOW God.

All of his life people had taught him about God, and he, himself had taught others about God.

What the prophet Jeremiah is saying to us is that the kind of knowledge we seek

is not the kind of knowledge of God that we get by going to Sunday school or church or Bible study;

it's the kind of knowledge of God that comes directly from a personal and intimate relationship with God –

not a long distance relationship like calling God on the phone at night as a routine check-in

or dropping by for a Sunday visit as a weekly ritual,

but an intimate personal relationship in which you trust God so much

that you let him take a knife and cut into your heart and carve his name into it

so that there is no longer any question that you belong to him and to him alone.

You are his beloved child,

and yet you are also his servant, his slave, willing to submit and commit to his perfect will.

And this kind of relationship is not the kind that grows organically and automatically over time,

but the kind that results from a life-transforming experience.

In the early church that happened in baptism,

in which adults seeking to become one with God would be fully immersed in the water and held under it

as they were physically buried with Christ by baptism into death

and then raised with Christ into new life.

But for those baptized as infants – like Luther – it takes some other encounter with God,

some other experience of the holy, some other transcendental event that changes one's entire life.

For Luther it happened the moment that God came to him in that particular passage of scripture. It wasn't the idea of justification by grace through faith that changed his life, it was the experiencing of that grace, an experience that changed who he knew God to be and who he knew himself to be in his relationship with God, an experience that changed how he saw the world and changed how he saw his place in the world. Light flooded his mind. Joy filled his heart. Peace engulfed his spirit. And in one single moment he was changed from someone who was trying to live a life pleasing to a God he only knew about, into someone who was passionately in love with a God who had captured his heart, a God he loved and trusted so completely that he was able to submit and commit to living out God's will, no matter what the cost.

The great message of the Reformation is not the "what" but the "Who".

It's not about the words, but the One who spoke them.

It's not about a concept, but a relationship.

The message of the Reformation is not so much about reforming the church as it is about reforming our hearts – your heart and mine.

So the question is...how do you know if your heart has been transformed?

Well how do we know Luther's life was transformed?

I'll give you 3 ways to tell.

1. We know his life was transformed because he couldn't keep quiet about his experience!

He had experienced the grace of God and he wanted everyone else to experience it too!

For the rest of his life,

he would tell the story of how he had encountered the living God in that one passage of scripture.

We know his life was transformed because he couldn't keep quiet about his experience.

2. We know his life was transformed because he wanted everyone else to have that same experience!

Because he had experienced God through scripture, he assumed that's how everyone would experience it.

But how could they?

Scripture was written only in Hebrew and Greek and Latin, copied by scribes and monks by hand.

Only churches and priests and universities and scholars had access to scripture.

And so Luther began to translate scripture into the language of the people?

Just so they could read it?

No, so that by reading it, they might encounter the same life-transforming grace that Luther had!

We know his life was transformed because he couldn't keep quiet about his experience

and he wanted everyone else to have that same experience of God!

3. We know his life was transformed because he was willing to share his experience no matter the cost.

At first he thought he could convince the Church to listen to the truth, but it became clear they wouldn't.

And when he was asked to renounce his words, he knew that if he did not do so, it could cost him his life.

But because he KNEW God, because God had written his name upon his heart, Martin Luther said,

"...my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.

Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

We know Luther's life was transformed because he couldn't keep quiet about his experience

he wanted everyone else to have that same experience of God,

and he was willing to give up everything – even his life – if that is what his witness cost.

Reformation is not a day, or an historical observance, or a denominational celebration.
Reformation is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God.

Today is about so much more than wearing red or “Here I Stand” socks.
It’s about so much more than singing “A Mighty Fortress” or hearing about Martin Luther.
It’s about so much more than the theological interpretation of a scripture verse about grace.
All of those things are part of our “old covenant”,
a covenant of rites and rituals and remembrances,
a covenant of words about a God we are told loves us.

Today is about the new covenant,
the new covenant that can never be captured in words or songs,
that can never be taught, but only caught,
that is not knowing about God, but about knowing God,
and knowing God not merely as an acquaintance, nor even merely as a friend,
but as the most intimate partner we can ever have.

It’s a life-long journey,
but it begins the instant that God catches hold of your heart in a way that transforms your life,
And you know it has happened when you start telling people about the God you know and love,
You know it has happened when you want everyone to know that same amazing, awesome God.
And you know it has happened when you trust that amazing, awesome God no matter what.

Will you pray with me?

God,
There are people here who are giving thanks
for the way you have transformed and are continuing to transform their lives.
And there are people here who, like Luther, have you sought to please you all their life,
and yet still are looking for that gate into Paradise,
not the Paradise of the next world, but the Paradise here in this.

Jesus, you said,
“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for.
Keep on seeking, and you will find.
Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.”

God, on this day that we celebrate the Restoring, Renewing, Reforming power of your Spirit,
we open our bodies and minds and souls and especially our hearts to you.

Write your name on each of our hearts.

Enlighten our minds, engage our hearts, empower our spirits, and enable our bodies
so that we are each and every one of us transformed this day.

Pour out your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you
and perfectly love each and every one of your children.

Fill us, not just with knowledge about you, but with your very self.

We pray in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. Amen