

Reformation Sunday (October 25, 2020)

Text: John 3:16-21

“Stuck inside of Mobile (with the Memphis Blues Again)”

“So you do the best you can and hope that it’s good enough for God!”
Thus did one older woman summarize her theology and faith. Here was a woman who had lived all her life within the community of faith called the Lutheran Church. She had attended Sunday School, been through Confirmation Class, worshiped faithfully — and, as far as I know, prayed regularly, read her Portals of Prayer, and maybe even listened to The Lutheran Hour. After more than seven decades of such involvement and interaction, her summary theology was: *“So you do the best you can and hope that it’s good enough for God!”*

It makes me wonder — is that where most of you are? Has the message of the Gospel become so hidden, so buried under the barrage of TV commercials, soap operas, “R”-rated movies, and sports mania that it is no longer heard, much less understood? Has the announcement of grace been lost to a cultural insistence on proclaiming a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” kind of thinking? Have the good tidings of God’s free gift of forgiveness been replaced by the more acceptable tidings of one’s ability to get just about anything one wants as long as there is MasterCard, American Express, or whatever is in your wallet?

I have for some time realized that, as I talk to kids in Confirmation Class, I face the battle of having just sixty minutes each week, while MTV, HULU, NetFlix and HBO get their minds and hearts for ten times that amount of time and have their attention for more than a decade before I can even get a word in. There the message bombards them that you are what you own, that acquiring is the goal and purpose of life, that self is the most important entity of all, the center of the universe.

If that weren’t bad enough, there are programs that intensify those commercial messages. I hear from some religious types who have gotten their undies all in a bunch over some of the sexual portrayals — just last month several in congress pushed for legislation to charge NetFlix with

child pornography for the movie “Cuties”(haven’t seen it; don’t know what it’s about; I don’t have access to Netflix ... I know, how Neanderthal can one be?) — but I hear no outrage over the ever-present assault of works-righteousness that dominates just about every other facet of programming. If that is true of what is being flashed before our youth, is it equally (or even correspondingly) true for adults?

On this Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation. But that celebration has to be more than just remembering that Martin Luther nailed some statements to a church door, or that he took some beer-hall melodies and turned them into hymns (that is the background of “A Mighty Fortress”).

The true heritage of the Lutheran Reformation is the proclamation of the Gospel that God governs everything by grace. And a true commemoration and celebration of that heritage would be an increased dedication to understanding and living out that grace principle.

That “grace principle” is announced by none other than Jesus Himself in today’s Gospel: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*** Do we hear anything here about what we have to do? No! This is pure Gospel — God’s announcement of how God intends to reconcile the creation to Himself. There is no conditional or transactional language here — no *“IF you do this, then God will do that.”* There is simply the declaration that God has arranged everything necessary in the gift of His Son.

God has done this purely and solely out of one motivation — love. Time and again we get hit with the idea that God is some kind of angry bully up in the clouds who, with booming voice and lightning bolts, is just eager and ready to smite any who step out of line. Maybe we’re more comfortable with that image of an angry God — maybe it fits our more perverse natures constantly trying to figure out ways to ace out a god who seems to be overdosed on caffeine.

But the witness of Jesus is that God is love — and out of love God has devised a means by which our broken relationship with Him can be mended. We did not devise this — we would have been perfectly content to leave God out there somewhere in His (as we imagine or have been told) eternal snit and try to live our lives in such a way that we hope He never notices us: *“So you do the best you can and hope that it’s good enough for God!”*

That attitude grows from an assessment (or better, a conviction) that God’s ultimate goal is to judge us — that is, to find us guilty of some infraction. We have been told repeatedly that God has a pretty short fuse and spends the majority of His time keeping score of all that we do wrong — and, one day, God will even up that score.

The Good News, according to American civic religion, is that one of the scores God keeps is for effort — so if you do the best to can ... well, that can then offset anything bad you cannot escape doing. This meshes very well with a victimization mentality — I am not responsible for my actions ... it’s all society’s fault ... my mother made me this way ... I’m doing the best I can — therefore, how could God condemn me if I’m trying as hard as I can and still don’t measure up? Our culture’s answer: God’s doesn’t work that way. Yes, God keeps score; but He scores our effort highest of all — get an “A” for effort and you can flunk just about everything else with impunity.

Jesus says: *“... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* God is not in the condemnation business; God is in the salvation business. God is not running a score-keeping operation; God is a Lover who is constantly wooing us, His intended, to come to Him. How do we know this? We hear it from, and see it in, Jesus. This is what confuses me so mightily: People have this loving image of Jesus — almost to the point of regarding Him as somewhat wimpy — yet they hold on to this notion of the angry judge, God. Jesus told us: *“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”* (John 14:9). Yet there persists this notion that

condemnation is the name of the game.

In one sense, that happens to be true! Condemnation does sort of wind up at the center of the whole operation. But listen to Jesus. Speaking to a world to which God sent His Son not to condemn, there comes condemnation: ***“And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”***

Who makes this condemnation? Jesus says: WE do that! We make the assessment that God has such a problem with sin that we had better hide ourselves in the darkness of our obsessions or imagination. Remember Adam and Eve in the Garden? After they had disobeyed, they heard the sound of God walking in the garden and they did what? They hid! Why? Because God was now the enemy! Who said so? They said so! God did not come to walk in the garden with the announcement, *“I know what you did and I’m comin’ to get ya!”* No, they hid themselves. That was a choice they made — they made their own condemnation.

It happens still today. We still love darkness rather than light. I have used this illustration so often I can’t remember with whom, so forgive me if you’ve heard it before. We would prefer to hide in the darkness in God’s basement because we broke God’s lamp in the basement — meanwhile God is at the top of the stairs saying to us: *“Look, I know every lamp you’ve every broken in my basement. I don’t care about that! What I really want is to have a nice supper with you. Come on up.”*

In the darkness our imaginations run rampant. When you cannot see, your brain provides images that are denied to your eyes. So we imagine God to be like we are: always ready to pay back, to give as good as we have gotten.

While the darkness hides us, it cannot hide the light. Jesus says, ***“...all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”*** We may hope that our best efforts are good enough for God, but we suspect they are not. Our self-assessment is that

we have failed, and we do not want the light to expose that failure. So we will not come into the light; we would rather fashion some kind of life for ourselves than risk letting the light show us for what we are.

The light will reveal what is true. Jesus says, ***“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*** This is what God desires and offers — that we acknowledge what is true — that we stop trying to fake Him out, quit trying to put together some kind of acceptable “me” to trot out onto God’s stage, that we give up this, *“do the best you can and hope that it’s good enough for God”* routine.

Just admit the truth. What is the truth? We’re no good. On our best days, we come up as rotten; on our worst days ... don’t ask.

Not guilt. Guilt has nothing to do with this. God does not ask us to come to Him all hangdog and chest-thumping. Just step into the light and admit that what it reveals is true.

Until we can do that, we will forever hang onto the fantasy that we can make ourselves “good enough.” That will become our final condemnation — we will love the darkness of our fantasy rather than the light of God’s embracing forgiveness.

I don’t want to be too hard on that 70-year-old Lutheran lady who had not yet grasped the Gospel — it’s tough to accept the truth when there are so many flattering and believable lies swirling all around us. We all get sucked in. I guess that’s why we need to have a Reformation Sunday, so that we can retune our receivers to the Gospel, maybe get it right, even if later we forget it and fall back into old patterns.

So hear it again: ***“... the righteousness of God has been disclosed ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”***

I do need to explain the title of today's sermon. It comes from a song by Bob Dylan, written more than fifty years ago (and yes, I realize this is the second reference to Dylan this month). The last stanza contains these lyrics:

*Now the bricks lay on Grand Street where the neon madmen climb
They all fall there so perfectly; It all seems so well timed
And here I sit so patiently waiting to find out what price
You have to pay to get out of going through all these things twice
Oh, Mama, can this really be the end
To be stuck inside of Mobile
With the Memphis blues again?*

No price to pay. No “good enough.” No blues (Memphis or otherwise). Just the truth.

It's all in the promise from God through Jeremiah, 600 years before it was made fully known in Christ: ***“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, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”***

Amen.