

A Lectionary 30 10.29.23

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Focus Statement: God is always dragging us forward.

It's Reformation Sunday today, good job on the red, as always. Everyone is looking sharp out there. I want to do something maybe a little unexpected with the sermon today, on the day normally used to lift up the greatness of Martin Luther as a reformer and talk about some of the reasons maybe we don't want to follow him so closely. I hinted at something in my sermon last week, and I want to come back and flesh that out a little more.

Last week when I was lifting up all the things the ELCA is doing to work towards peace in the Middle East and in interreligious work with our Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers, I mentioned that in 1994, the ELCA released a declaration repudiating the antisemitic writings of Martin Luther, words used to justify the holocaust. And then I just went on from there because I only have so long in a sermon and that wasn't the main point. But I want to come back and tell you about that comment. Because here's the thing about Martin Luther. I love Luther's theology. Luther came to understand beyond a shadow of a doubt that the grace and love of God was a gift freely given by God because grace and love is who God is. There is nothing we can ever do to deserve this love, no way to earn it. We can try to follow all the law, but we are human, and we will always fall short, and none of that matters because through Christ alone—full stop—through Christ alone we are made children of God. There is no ladder we climb to get to God, God comes down to us, in our broken mess, to love us, forgive us, claim us as God's own, because loving, forgiving, and claiming God's broken and sinful creation is who God is and what God does. This absolute understanding of and dependence on God's grace led Luther to do some really good and

amazing things. The Bible is written in languages we actually read, languages other than classical Latin, because of Martin Luther. Public education exists because of Martin Luther. It wasn't enough to translate the bible into German, if most of the population couldn't read in any language, so Luther led churches to set up schools to teach people to read. You take communion, you don't just watch me take it, because of Luther. Pre-Luther, there were so many hoops to jump through to "earn" communion, that only the priests were worthy, and even most of them were probably lying about their quote unquote worthiness. Gathering funds to help the needy in the immediate community, that was the church of Acts, but Luther brought it back. Luther urged churches to collect money not to build bigger and better churches in Rome, but to help people in the places from where the alms came. Martin Luther is one of those watershed characters in history where every aspect of life around the world was changed by his presence.

And. And Luther was a crusty, grumpy, monk who suffered from intestinal distress, was sick all the time, and could be, I'll be frank, a real jerk. I took a class on the Theology of Martin Luther in seminary, and for our final project one of my classmates created a website where he pulled insults from Luther's writings, and if you push a button it will generate an insult for you along with a citation, so you know where Luther wrote it. The page has everything from "You are blasphemous, abominable rascals and damned scum of Satan" to "You are like mouse-dropping in the pepper." Google Lutheran Insulter, it's still up. And as an aside, one of my great regrets is he asked me to partner with him on the project, and I instead chose to write a fifteen-page research paper on Luther's notion of Bound

Conscience. The Lutheran Insulter gets picked up by Slate every so often, my essay sits on my seminary MacBook which may or may not turn on any longer.

So that's Luther's grumpy side in a funny way. But he wrote things that were less funny and more deeply problematic and egregious. The writing I referred to last week is a treatise called "On the Jews and Their Lies." Written in 1543, it is an anti-Semitic screed denouncing Jews and urging their persecution. It's horrific, it was used to justify antisemitism in the Middle Ages, and it got renewed popularity during the rise of the Nazi party, where it regularly showed up at rallies and in Nazi writing. As I mentioned last Sunday, the ELCA issued a declaration repudiating Luther's antisemitic writing in 1994, and we reaffirmed that repudiation in 2021, saying, "In the long history of the church, the treatment accorded the Jewish people by Christians has been among our most grievous and shameful legacies... As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations."

Why do I talk about this on Reformation Sunday? Because, dear people, that we as a church have to, and have, repudiated the writings of our own namesake theologian, and have used his writings on God's incredible grace, love, and forgiveness to get us to a place of recognizing the need to repudiate his writings, is an example of the way that the church is always reforming. This is an example of how we hadn't arrived at perfection five-hundred odd years ago when Luther wrote some stuff down, and we're still not there yet. We are, we always will be, people in process. That is what is meant by the Reformation. Reformation

Sunday is not “yay, look how great we are” it’s, look at this crazy ride God has been dragging us along on, look how far we’ve come, yes, and how far we’ve yet to go.

Which brings us to Moses. We took a big jump from the middle of Exodus to the end of Deuteronomy, because narratively there’s not a whole lot that happened between the Golden Calf and Moses’s death. They wandered in the wilderness more, they complained about the food, God got annoyed, Moses got annoyed, they got some laws, there’s some census data gathered. The rest of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are important, but in moving the story along, we’re not missing anything major in this jump. Right before this reading, chapters 32 and 33, Moses gave a final speech to the people and blessed them. “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah... and the Lord showed him the whole land.” After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they finally made it to the promised land! They arrived!

They arrived, and Moses doesn’t get to go in. He gets to “see it with [his] eyes,” but that’s it. Moses “died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.” We talked about this in Bible chat, why Moses died so close. And I have to admit, I’d never seen this as a bad thing. Moses had worked hard to lead these people for a long time. He’d gotten them to where they needed to go, he’d done his best. And now, his work was done. He didn’t have to lead them any further. He could watch them walk onward, knowing there would be good times and struggles, and he wasn’t responsible for figuring out the struggles any longer.

Something else we talked about in Bible chat was this line about how “no one knows his burial place to this day.” I think part of the reason for this is because if they, if we, knew

where Moses was buried, there would be temptation to stay there. To remain with the grave of the leader who had led well and not go forward with Joshua into the future God was preparing. Moses's death and secret burial freed the Israelites from any temptation to remain on the far side of the Jordan. They would take with them the ark of the covenant, the law God had given them through Moses, they would take the story of the Exodus, the way God led them from slavery to freedom. But Moses, like we've read, over the fall, as great as he was "unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform," was human. He wasn't perfect, he made mistakes. This break let the people move forward, holding the good Moses gave them, into a new future with new hopes, new possibilities, new mistakes, yes, but also new potential. By leading them through the Exodus, from slavery into freedom, Moses, servant of God, taught them that.

Dear people of God, this is what we celebrate at Reformation. We celebrate that we have a God who is always pulling us forward. Who is always putting people, places, opportunities, in front of us to draw us closer and deeper into God's future. Who never lets us stay where we are at and who is continually working through us to pull us closer in love to God, to each other, and to all of God's creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.