

Deaconess student Carrie Sovola

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Reformation Sunday

Today's New Testament lesson from Romans about justification by grace through faith is a fitting text for Reformation Sunday. Some of the scriptural commentaries I came across this week suggested that there might be some danger in that, however.

One author stated that perhaps one of the most important points about this passage is that we are never far from misunderstanding or even misusing what seems to be the central statement of God's redemption in Jesus Christ.

Too often we stand upon our traditions and theology to define who God is and what God does. And throughout Scripture, God continually shows God's people the inadequacy of doing this.

He added that it is not that we might be missing the mark—although we should always be attentive to this reality—it is that we should not get too comfortable.

But I think it is so easy to become comfortable in this Good News! It brings us poor, miserable sinners some relief from all of the guilt. We can rest in the grace of God. Rest is good. We need rest—especially now. But sometimes too much rest can cause us to become inactive.

This is the danger of taking God's grace too seriously, resting in quietness and inaction.

A few years ago, I believe it was the year of the celebration of 500 years of the Reformation, Pastor Scales led us in a book study of Martin Luther and the Called Life. The book includes a whole chapter on our vocation as citizens. Faith and politics, the cringe-worthy stuff we do not like to talk about.

Because they speak to matters we hold dear to our hearts, we avoid talking about faith and politics and keep our opinions to ourselves, lest we have those impassioned, non-dinner table voice conversations, as I spoke about in my homily last month.

We have a vocation to be involved in the world. Our calling as citizens does not offer us the luxury of keeping our opinions to ourselves.

Martin Luther makes clear our vocation as citizens, and he says this includes politics.

In today's contentious climate, maybe there is a better term to use instead of "politics."

Service in the community?

Advocacy?

Social justice?

I do not know that these words are any more comfortable.

God challenges us. His Good News should keep us uncomfortable. We celebrate the Reformation today because Martin Luther was a protester!

Many of you know the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran theologian known for his steadfast resistance to the Nazi regime. His writings on Christianity's role in the secular world have become widely influential. He expressed vocal opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program and the genocidal persecution of the Jews. He was arrested, imprisoned, and was hanged for his treason.

In the Martin Luther book study, we learned that Bonhoeffer was dismayed by the ability of Christians to look the other way, comfortable in their grace, when the vulnerable, the weak, and the Jews were deemed unworthy of life. Most notably, he said:

“We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and be showing a real compassion that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer...Christians are called to compassion and action, not [out of their] own sufferings, but by the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, for whose sake Christ suffered.”

Christ suffered for ALL. The truth.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us that because of this truth we are set free.

As I was sitting with the text this week, I kept thinking about the word “truth” and what “truth” means today.

Where do we find the truth today?

We have access to and are even targeted by, alternative facts, conspiracy theories, and misinformation more than ever before. And with left- and right-leaning news sources, it is hard work to be rightly informed these days.

This month, I watched a weekly broadcast of a panel of female Christian leaders who have been discussing faith, gender, race, and politics. The first week's discussion was titled “Truth on Trial.”

They asked the question, “Does truth matter?”

Of course, it does.

Then they asked, “Whose truth?”

Ah...

The discussion continued about the difference between a lived experience and what we are taught or encouraged to think and feel.

There is a difference between knowing intellectually what we see in the news and knowing relationally when we listen to someone who has lived or is presently living that trauma.

There is a difference between watching edited clips of protesting and listening to a friend describe pouring milk over others and himself to ease the burning pain from tear gas.

There is a difference between seeing maps and charts of Covid-19 outbreaks and sitting in fear with a loved one who has tested positive.

Whose truth? To be rightly informed requires very careful listening. When someone tells you their truth, you are on sacred ground.

The Gospel of John says, “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’”

Free from sin
Free from fear
Free to serve
Free to abide uncomfortably in His word

When we meet another where they are, as they are, in kindness and with compassion, we are truly greeting Jesus.

Thanks be to God when we know Jesus tells us His truth, for freedom is ours. Thanks be to God for grace. Amen.

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