

Sermon – John 8:31-36; Jeremiah 31:31-34  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Reformation – Year B  
27 October 2024

“Forgiveness is Life”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. “I will never be good enough for you, will I? No matter how hard I try.” These could have been the words of Brother Martin, Augustinian Friar, from his time at the monastery in Erfurt. Those years were dark for Luther, lived under his understanding of God as harsh and judgmental. In spite of constant confession and repeated penance, Martin knew that he didn’t measure up. This was not a matter of low self-esteem or unrealistic expectations. It was an honest assessment of a life lived under God’s law. No matter how hard he tried, he would never be good enough.
2. These words, however, are not from Martin. They are spoken by Mirabel, the achingly-ordinary protagonist in Disney’s *Encanto*. Surrounded by a household full of magically-gifted relatives, Mirabel stumbles through life without much worth or value, she feels. She cannot be faulted for not trying, but her best efforts go amiss and make things worse. She is left in a state of confession. No matter what she does, she feels she will not be good enough in the eyes of her Abuela, try as she might. Martin Luther felt the same, knew the same was true for him before God. And so, I’m sure, do we. Not all the time, perhaps. But in the long stretches of the night, the law speaks to us to, reminding us of the wrong we’ve done, of the good we’ve left undone. To be sure, maybe we don’t worry about sin in quite the way that Luther did (and that may be a good thing!), or even like our grandparents did. God, we tell

- ourselves, is love, which is true, and God wouldn't hold us to such high standards. Well, balderdash. The simple fact of the matter is that we have sinned and fallen short. This is not merely theoretical or even theological. We have simply failed to be the people God calls us to be. And not, by the way, because of our accumulated peccadillos, bad as they may be. Our capital-S sin is our failure to see and believe the reality of who God is for us.
3. In the midst of the Feast of Tabernacles, the celebration of God's journeying with the people out of bondage and into freedom, Jesus says that he now is the pillar of fire by night, the very Light of the World come to illuminate God's truth. The truth he speaks, however, is not first one of reassurance but of diagnosis. In response to the farcical claim of some that, as Abraham's descendants, they have never been slaves of anyone – never mind 400 years in Egypt, not to mention the current occupation of their land by one Roman Empire – Jesus tells them that they are very much enslaved. Not by outer masters but by inner rebellion, the constant inward curvature upon the self that is our sinful disposition. But the diagnosis of our sin-sick souls is not meant to leave us in despair. When Jesus stands before you, the law he speaks is always followed by gospel. Jesus has come to set you free. To forgive you. And with forgiveness comes life. Karoline Lewis writes, "To be set free here and now . . . is to be free to see that, in Jesus, God is here, present, offering a relationship that is one of abiding, love, provision, sustenance, nurture and protection—a relationship that is not bound by the constraints of past worship and sacrifice because it cannot be, a relationship that is not limited to what is prescribed by limited perceptions of God," she concludes, "because God loves the world."
  4. There are things about election season that I won't miss, starting, no doubt, with the 832,463 text messages each day asking me for money. But it's more than that. Our political climate is such that we have become incredibly good at confessing other people's sins. *They* have done this; *they* have failed to do

this; *they* will certainly continue to be horrible. And make no mistake, there is plenty of sin and evil out there, and God is fully aware of it. Jesus is gonna talk to those people, too. This morning, however, here in this place, Jesus speaks to you. *You* are a sinner in need of reformation, redemption, resurrection. This truth is the beginning of good news, however, for it is not the last word. For you are reformed, redeemed, resurrected. Free, for that matter. Lords of all, free of everything, as Luther writes in *The Freedom of a Christian*. And thank God, for our problems won't go away after election day. But come what may, God is with us, a very present help in time of trouble. Come what may, you – forgiven, free, alive – are the people God is calling to be light on behalf of the Light of the World.

5. Things are never too far gone for God. Not in Jesus' day, or Luther's, or ours. God does God's best work with the lost, the broken, the dead. To a people in exile and despair, Jeremiah spoke of a day when the Lord would make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. Jeremiah spoke these words when there was no House of Israel, no House of Judah. These kingdoms had been erased from the map by the Assyrians and Babylonians. But such is the power of God's Word, the strength of God's love, that God would begin by raising up the people once more. Death and despair do not get the last word. Not even for Mirabel, who by the end of the movie can see clearly, for the first time. Her family's life flows from the sacrificial love of her Abuela, and Mirabel finds a new confession upon her lips: "We were saved because of you." Is this not now our confession of faith, too?
  
6. We, too, hear today of the truth of our salvation, rejoicing in the good news that Jesus, in his atoning work on the cross and his life-giving resurrection, has saved us. Set us free. Set *you* free. Our freedom in Christ is so complete, Luther teaches, that we are now perfectly dutiful servants of all, attentive to the needs of our neighbors. So, you bunch of sinners, hear the good news: Your sin is forgiven. You who were bound are free. You who were dead are

alive. Because Jesus says so, and in his dying and rising has made it so forever. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.