

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, today is Reformation Sunday, the recognition of a particular time of the church's history where the message of the Gospel grew stale in the functions of the church, where grace seemed to be replaced with obligation, where truth was shrouded in bureaucracy. We recognize this time not as a monument to the past but a mission moving forward. Our longing for comfort can make the Gospel message adapt to our standards instead of the reverse. We are but human, holy God, blessed yet sinful, faithful yet broken, seeking you throughout our lives, and we pray for a Reformation Sunday every Sunday, a recommitment to your timeless ideals often shrouded in staleness and comfort.

Holy God, hear our prayers today and always, the ones we have lifted among our neighbors in Christ, the ones we still hold in our hearts, the ones that our world groans under. We pray for those who struggle with the brokenness of the world that imposes on them as poverty, abuse, and so many other tortures. We pray for those who struggle with illness, mental, physical or otherwise. We pray that we may be the faithful agents of Christ's Holy Kingdom, bringing it forth as we follow Christ out of joy, not out of fearful obligation. We pray all these things in his Holy Blessed Name as we pray together the prayer he taught us, saying...

SERMON

When I was in seminary, I took a class on Medieval Christianity. The course instructor wasn't on staff; he was an adjunct instructor who specialized in this area but normally didn't teach at the school. He led a particularly open class, focused on discussion and learning the material. I remember when it came time for the final project, I had a list of questions. I was used to the grad school mentality of getting every detail down so I could

get the best possible grade. When we had our conversation, he made a joke about the requirements, making it seem more strict than the directions stated. When I started writing furiously, he stopped me and said, "Geez, don't worry. It's only a project. Do the best you can and learn the most you can, and you'll get a good grade."

Needless to say, I was floored. I wasn't used to this style. The final project to him was a means to an end: just learn more about the topic and to be a well-informed scholar of Christian history. I was used to something far more stringent; you usually had a list of requirements and responsibilities. You wanted to write everything the best you could to get the best grade. This instructor wasn't interested in us getting good grades; he just wanted the best effort possible, and made the grade a secondary concern. This opened up a world of grace to me, grace that we need.

It's a time old debate: the mix between obligation and freedom. Sometimes it's only a show; you can be "volunteered" to do something, or "voluntold." But what is it like in the church? Are you here because you were "voluntold?" Are we called to a spirit of obligation and obedience? Do we fear God out of the mentality that God is bigger than us and can lay the smack down if we do not obey? Do we fear that if we don't do what God wants, then we will be punished? Or are we called to a different spirit, a spirit of faithful following and care? It's the question that fueled the uprising in the Reformation, and it's just as relevant today as it was then.

We know a little bit about the Reformation, the birth of Protestantism, but it's always important to go back and rediscover what made it important. Let's face it, every now and then the church needs time to reorient to the faithful words of scripture and good theology, and this was it. It started with a regular Catholic monk named Martin Luther. He

was a unique individual who read his scriptures and did his studies as he should. However, one day, as rumor has it, Martin Luther had a flash of insight in the same place where most of us do our legendary thinking: on the toilet. Good ol' Marty rediscovered an important facet of the scriptures, lost in history: we are saved by God's grace, not the work of our own hands. This prompted him to write his 95 Theses explaining his theological differences with the Catholic Church and posted them for all God's people to see. He was excommunicated, removed from Catholic fellowship, and thus began the Reformation that allows us to sit here in God's house today. It was about a twist of theology that reminds us what service to God looks like, and it begins with how we relate to our Creator and what our Creator calls us to do. And it starts with how we see our God and what that means.

We are called to "fear God." "Fear of God" is an expression used a lot in scripture, and it's easy to get confused on what it means. It sounds so very punitive, that God is the almighty parent that knows all, sees all, and punishes much. But I don't think that's the wisdom of what is being said. Sure, God knows all and sees all, but is God looking down us with that cosmic clipboard, making checks on the "Good" and "Bad" columns? Is God watching us at all times knowing if you are doing good in your life or messing it all up, affecting the rewards we get at the end? No. I am not describing God. In fact, I just described Santa Claus. "He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!" It's not like that with God. The God we serve, the Gospel we proclaim is not rewards and punishments; it's grace with accountability, and there's a clear difference.

Think about it this way, and before you take it too far, let me explain. Let fear of God be like...fear of spouse or fear of your best friend. Yep, I'm going to explain. When you love

another person, when you truly care for them and wish their best well being, they become someone you want to please. You want them beside you at every point, and you want to make them happy and joyful. You want them to be proud of you, to be excited for you in the good times of life, to cry with you in the worst times of life. Ultimately, you never want to disappoint them. To disappoint them is its own personal kind of torture, because it's a personal defeat. You feel bad because your love for the other has driven you to please them, to care for them as they have cared for you. This is the joyful obedience God calls us towards: service because we want to, not because we are fearful not to.

Jesus says in the Gospel of John that he now calls us friends, not servants, because servants do not know what the Master is doing. We are friends of Christ, and when you think about that kind of friendship, it's the same way. We long not to disappoint our Lord because it is painful to think about disappointing him. We long to serve because we want to, because it brings us joy to do so. It's no longer bound in lawfulness and punitive sanctions. As Romans tells us today, the Law does not justify. It's not about fearful obedience and obligation. It's about the spirit of free service, service so devoted to our Lord. It's not because we fear him out of fearfulness of punishment but desire to please God out of our deepest love for God.

As you may know, my wife and I are raising our third guide dog puppy, Willoughby. It's not an easy thing, raising a puppy for such an important calling. It takes a lot of work, and even then, half of them just aren't suited for the job. They might not grasp an important piece of training. They might have a fear that prevents them from doing what they need to do or just have a personality not suited for the task. We are learning new things and new means of teaching at every turn, but the key behind the training is you have

to make them *want* do what they need to do. It has to be a very trusting relationship. For example, lying on their back. To a dog, an animal with an strong natural instinct, this is a vulnerable position. It leaves them open to attack or injury. But it's something they have to do with a blind person. So, you have to convince them it's a safe thing to do. If you force them to lie on their back, they won't just not do it. They will fight back because you are a threat. Animal instincts take over. So, one has to show the dog over time that you are safe, you will take care of them. It's not about imposing your will on the dog but teaching him or her that the right thing to do is the most rewarding and, well, fun thing to do. The key with these dogs is that it's not about punishment. You nurture them with positivity along the way, and they will be your friend for life. If they violate the appropriate boundaries you set out, they get something positive taken away, like your attention. To these pack-oriented animals, yeah, that hurts.

To some this may sound too fluffy, too easy, too much lacking teeth, but that's really the means of the Gospel. God calls us to a spirit of freedom, a spirit of willingness, not a spirit of imposed obedience. That was the spirit of the Law, the spirit that Christ abolished. That's also the point of this passage from Romans: the point of the law is not gone, just how we relate to it. Christ said he came to fulfill the law, not to bring it to destruction. The spirit, though, has changed. God calls us to follow because we want to follow, not because we are too fearful not to follow. If you think about it, it's the way we want to be related to. We want to know we are loved and cared for, that we can trust instead of enforced upon. We are indeed freed for joyful service, we are able to do the job because we want to, because we trust the one in charge more than fearing the punishment. That is the heart of the Gospel of Freedom, the Gospel we follow in joyful love, not in the anxiety of fear.

This, after all, is Reformation Sunday. We remember on this day the act of the pastor Martin Luther so many, many years ago, renewing the call of grace in a punitive world. Perhaps we are in the midst of a new Reformation. We are in a world that hears Christianity telling people what to do and where to go. We are in a world where people hear “Christianity” and it sounds like rule-following and moralistic nit-picking. It sounds like parents telling kids what to do instead of helping them find their way in a complicated world. But this isn’t the way of Christ. This isn’t faithful service; it’s directive. Instead, we need a new period of grace with accountability. The world needs reminding that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about grace that calls people to faithful lives, not the binding law dictating right action. It’s not about coming to church alone but living that Gospel life outside of the church that makes people want to come in and see what it’s all about. The world needs reminding that Christ is with us, God goes with us, the Spirit directs us in faithfulness, but sometimes our humanity gets in the way. That says nothing about the importance of the church in our age. We are just as important as ever, and maybe we need that time of Reformation to come back to the ideals that made it all worthwhile. It’s not punitive rule following. It’s not fluff saying that everything will always be all right in this life when we follow Christ. It is about life having meaning that transcends our daily tasks, that gives meaning to how we interact with each other and the greater work we do in the world under the banner of the Gospel.

We are never exempt from the question, so I’ll ask it to you now. Where do you need a reformation in your life? Is it something small or something that can lead to a bigger question? Is it a bad habit or is it something you just need to let go of? Is it anger that brings you down? What is getting in the way of the Gospel life? The assignment is before

you, and the instructor stands ready to guide us toward a good project. Don't do it because you are focused on the good grade because the work of the assignment is the point. Do it because you want to please the instructor, for the instructor wants you to learn the lessons you need to in order to make the journey worthwhile. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.