

October 25, 2020

This is Reformation Sunday. In our Lutheran tradition, we know that we are justified by grace through faith. That means God doesn't love any more or any less because of our actions. In other words, we don't earn God's favor by works, we have already earned God's favor just by being who we are-- a baptized child of God.

We are assured of God's love and forgiveness. Now, the next question then becomes, so what... What does that mean for our life here on earth? Our Gospel lesson today says, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Today I'd like to do a little reflecting on this Christian Freedom.

Luther wrote an essay on the Freedom of a Christian. He writes, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

It sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? We are perfectly free, we don't have to do anything to earn God's love, and exactly because of that freedom, we love God and we are called to love our neighbor. In other words, we respond to our freedom with responsibility. Responsibility to care for others.

Freedom and responsibility are a little like law and gospel... We have to be mindful that we always need both. If we are to live healthy and productive lives, it's not one or the other, but both / and.

Freedom without responsibility leads to distrust and fear of one another, which breaks down community. True freedom in any community is always balanced with responsibility toward one another.

And this goes hand in hand with a life full of meaning and purpose. It's that great spiritual paradox of bearing a cross to love our neighbor. If we live our lives only to ourselves, we lose ourself. And when we live our lives for others, we find ourselves.

Quick story... This happened ten years ago. I was in my church office in Austin and I happened to see an obituary that came across my computer screen, and how or why it was there I have no idea! But it was an obituary for a woman I had known many years prior, she had been a resident at the facility I had worked at in St Paul.

There was going to be a funeral service in Plainview, outside of Rochester. And it happened to be on a day when I would be driving back here, to Welch. So, I decided to go.

Her name was Mary, and I had been her counselor for a couple years. In fact, I chaperoned a trip to California, and Mary was one of the people who came along.

The last time I had seen Mary was in my office, when I was an administrator, maybe twenty years earlier? Her sister was moving her from St Paul to a group home in Rochester. She would be closer to family. And it seemed like a great opportunity for her!

On that last day, Mary was in my office, crying and imploring with me that she didn't want to go. It was heart wrenching. Her sister and the social worker literally had to pull her out of the building. That was the last time I had seen her.

Being an administrator was often a heart ache. And I often went home feeling like I did nothing but get through another day, or that I had ruined some else's life. Just managing conflicts and arguing... It felt so despairing... That's why I got out of it. It was always making hard choices and people's lives were always in the balance.

When I went into the funeral home for Mary's service, I greeted her sister and she remembered me. She made it a point of telling me how Mary's life unfolded in Rochester, it sounded wonderful. And I was so happy to hear it.

There was a table in the back of the chapel, it was full of things that were important to Mary. I went over to look. There was a vinyl record that was made of our hand-bell choir. I remembered when they made the record and how proud she was to be a part of that. On the album jacket was a big picture of her and many of her friends, it brought back so many memories.

There was also a photo album of a trip to California. I saw myself in those pictures... And in one very poignant moment, I came to see how meaningful Mary's life had been. And when I saw that I had been a part of that, it brought healing. After years of doubt about whether or not that chapter of my life had any meaning, Mary's funeral service showed me otherwise.

We experience meaning and purpose in our lives when we love our neighbor, and sometimes it can take twenty years to see it... But make no mistake, when we invest in one another, it returns a life of riches we can scarcely imagine.

We are free in God's love, and we respond with service. It is healing, it is meaningful, and it's what we do as a church. It's in our fellowship, it's in our projects, it's in our supporting missions. We are blessed to be a blessing...

The good news of God's love and forgiveness frees us, and at the same time it moves us, it compels us, it animates us to love one another. This life is full of meaning and purpose, it is eternal and it is abundant.

Freedom and responsibility make healthy lives... You are justified by grace through Faith. That's why we say, Go in peace, Serve the Lord... And we all say, thanks be to God! Amen...