

Second Reading: Romans 3:19-28

Paul's words stand at the heart of the preaching of Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders. No human beings make themselves right with God through works of the law. We are brought into a right relationship with God through the divine activity centered in Christ's death. This act is a gift of grace that liberates us from sin and empowers our faith in Jesus Christ.

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Gospel: John 8:31-36

Jesus speaks of truth and freedom as spiritual realities known through his word. He reveals the truth that sets people free from sin.

³¹Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Lately I have been changing how I do most of my computer work. I now do stuff on my IPAD, I dictate things on my iPhone, and I'm constantly bouncing things from this device to another either via a thumb drive or the cloud. I really like the flexibility of it all and it certainly allows more access and immediacy when approaching things. Most of the time it is fun learning experience with all the new apps, and I enjoy the challenges and changes that have come with it. However, each new year it seems I'm dealing with changes in my health insurance coverage. My reaction to that change is not so favorable; not just because it usually means more money can come from my pocket, but also because I do not like having to learn a new system and I mutter and complain. In reality, the real issue is that something was changing that I didn't want it to, nor felt the need for it to change. In the end this is really our attitude about change. Change is welcomed when we are not satisfied with things as they are or if we can see immediate results. Change on things that I am satisfied with or have grown accustomed to, are a whole other matter. The reality is that if I am basically okay with things, my first reaction to any change is going to be one of resistance. The saying goes that the only thing that welcomes change is a wet baby and I'm here to verify for you that that is not always true.

Today is Reformation Sunday. It commemorates the time now beginning this year, to say more than five hundred year ago, when Martin Luther posted 95 theses that would stir a great debate within the theological community of Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was alarmed over the failure of the church to utilize its own scripture and tradition. There were fund-raisers from Rome telling North German peasants that they could buy their way out of purgatory. That was contrary to the Gospel, Luther said,

because the Gospel says that we are justified by the grace of God through faith, not by good works such as contributing to the building fund for St. Peter's in Rome. That was the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, which eventually led to the excommunication of Luther and his followers. Also, at the heart of Luther's movement was the basic issue of change. Luther believed that the church had failed to change with society. He believed that in trying to preserve or somehow protect the teaching of the Gospel, the church had turned inward; they had become resistant to meeting the peoples' needs. Therefore, these German people did not hear a worship service in their own language, they did not participate in the worship service with singing, they were not permitted to receive the elements of Holy Communion, they could not pick up a Bible and read it.

It must have been a time of great anguish for many people who were searching in their faith. They had been taught basically, to fear God, that God was a vengeful God looking to somehow payback with a great wrath for their misdeeds. And then comes the teaching of Luther who accuses the church of hindering the true Gospel message of grace discovered by faith in the Christ event. Everything was now changing including their core faith system, something that would be difficult for anyone to handle. Often when we stand and look back at the course of history, we mistakenly assume that the people of an era could see clearly the results of their decisions, but such is not the case. It would have been tough for people who were earnestly seeking God to make these choices. Do I do all these changes as Luther suggests or do I protect this institution, the church?

Perhaps, this is also part of the conflict of the Jews that Jesus addresses in today's gospel. He tells some Jews who had believed in him that if they continue in his word, they would truly be free. They immediately

deny that they are in any way lacking in freedom, claiming they have never been slaves to anyone. Their reply shows their resistance. The central story of Jewish scripture is the Exodus, when Jews who were enslaved in Egypt, are set free under Moses. They have forgotten their Exile into Babylonia in the Sixth Century B.C. They forgot about nations such as Assyria and Persia who dominated them. They chose not to remember the Greeks. Had they forgotten their current situation under the Romans? The Jews had not been totally free since soon after King Solomon, how do they even understand this statement that they are making?

Nevertheless, in today's gospel, they choose not to remember it. They did not want to hear, accept, or deal with Jesus telling them that they were not free. For if they were not free, they would not know the truth, and knowing the truth was something in which they had great pride. They wanted to believe that they had things figured out. But Jesus tells them that in order to continue and be his disciples, they will come to know a different truth, a new truth that would set them free. This hit at the very heart of their core values, beliefs, and faith. This spoke directly to how they knew God, approached God, and measured themselves as right with God. And for these people, their heritage as descendants of Abraham, played a major role in their perceived righteousness with God. Jesus confronts that, which leaves these hearers struggling with what Jesus was telling them now versus what they had likely heard all their lives. They were faced with a decision to change at their core. It was a decision that would drastically affect their view of Christ, their spirituality, and their relationship with God.

Without a doubt the early followers of Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, had to face the whole issue of change. Change is not easy, but often is necessary for survival and growth. Change is a part of most people's

existence in many areas. It has been said that this is why people enter therapy, join health clubs, get into recovery groups, read self-help books, attend motivational seminars, and make New Year's resolutions. One psychologist says that the single belief that is the most toxic to any relationship is the belief that the other person or other situation cannot change.

What about change in the church today? Reformation Sunday serves not only as a time to recall the events that affected the church in the sixteenth century, but also is the call to examine ourselves both as a church and as individuals. The church needs to continually monitor itself in issues that pertain to the Gospel and issues that simply become human created traditions, wishes, or preferences. We must ask ourselves as a Christian church, as a denomination, and as a congregation; are we sharing the Gospel of Christ in a way that is impacting lives? Are any of our traditions, and our sometimes protection of them, becoming roadblocks for others to hear the truth that will set them free? A saying that has become important to me over years is: "If nothing changes – nothing changes."

What about our own spirituality? How has your relationship to God changed over the last year, over the last month, since last week? How have we reacted to the different aspects of life that may force us to look in the mirror in a different way, or pushed us to see God's work in humanity in a way we did not expect? How have you seen God's gift of grace and love effect the world around you? How have you seen it not at work? How does this impact how we witness and see the shootings at the synagogue in Pittsburgh?

It is not that the Gospel message of Jesus and the cross event has changed. God's love for us, and the Good News of Christ are constant. However, the way that that continued presence with us, affects and directs us, changes as each new venture of life occurs. The struggle of faith is to remember the past, to remember where we have been, including the mountaintops and the deep valleys and the deserts, without becoming cemented into it. The struggle of faith is to stand present to our own approach to God, and see it being changed, being pushed, being continually shaped in the direction that the Holy Spirit is calling us toward. Our faith is not intended to remain stagnant. Our resistance to being changed spiritually is often a struggle against a prodding of the Holy Spirit. "You will know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth will make you free." Amen.