

TO BE FREE

Reformation Sunday-B

October 28, 2018

Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

First, before you are seated, I'd like us to share a moment of silence and reflection. There has been much violence and attempted violence this week. From mailing pipe bombs to a shooting at a Louisville Kroger, to yesterday's massacre at a Pittsburgh synagogue, and many more terrible things that didn't dominate the news cycle but were still tragic for those who were harmed or killed. (*silence*)

O God, creator and sustainer of us all, we are shocked beyond words and stunned into numbness by the evil that turns people toward hatred and violence. Give strength and comfort to all who mourn, to those who are healing, and to all who are forever changed by these events. Pour out your wisdom and spirit of compassion on each one of your people, including those whose values and beliefs do not coincide with our own. We lift up believers and nonbelievers alike, knowing that you have the power to reshape minds and reform the wills of all who, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Turn us to you, to witness your glory. Turn us to each other, so that we may see a reflection of you in them. Give us the vision and the will to love. Amen.

October 31st will mark the 501st anniversary of The Reformation, an occasion we are celebrating today as Lutherans and Episcopalians worshipping together, because we can.

Long before I was ordained, I had the privilege of serving as a lay assistant (LEM, to many of you) at an interim sharing of the Eucharist between Episcopalians and Lutherans in Toledo, back in 1983, I believe. That relationship moved from interim to full sharing with votes at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly of 1999 and by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2000.

Our congregations, Emmanuel and All Saints' have been doing shared worship events almost since the Lutherans started worshipping here in 2007.

That's how we got here. Now, the point of our shared worship is: Where do we go from here?

Today's readings are a departure from the weekly lectionary, because they are chosen for the observance of The Reformation. Many, if not most, Lutherans observe Reformation on the last Sunday of October, as the traditional date is the eve of All Saints'—October 31.

On this day we celebrate the heart of our faith: the gospel of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. We celebrate gospel as Good News—the good news that makes us free. While we remember the reformers, especially Martin Luther on this day, we give thanks for the ongoing reformation of the church. For me, especially, part of that reformation is the church moving more and more toward Jesus' goal that we may all be one. Yes, there are differences among denominations; and some of our most difficult differences exist within Lutheranism itself. Interestingly, it seems that most of the major so-called mainline denominations, like Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, have divisions. Frequently those divisions are based on doctrinal differences, and have often led to the refusal of one sector of a denomination to accept the other branch of the faith as "church." A professor of mine long ago told us that "denomination is a consequence of sin"—speaking about our refusal to come together, to find common ground, to heed the words of

Jesus about unity. So the words of the Apostle Paul, in our second reading, touch close to home: "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." [Romans 3:23]

Yet it is within the epistle to the Romans that we find good news: We are justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. God loves us in spite of ourselves; and the work of salvation is a work that Jesus has already accomplished for us. As today's gospel reading reminds us, we are made free not because of our ancestry, but rather because God in Jesus loves us with a love that is greater than any human accomplishment, or any attempt at earning God's favor. Freedom is being loved, not for what we do, but for who and whose we are.

I am glad we are here together this morning. I am glad that ELCA Lutherans and Episcopalians have a full communion relationship. It doesn't mean our expressions have to merge; but it does mean that we can do ministry together. So we're more than "next-door" neighbors on Sunday morning. We are co-workers with God in the re-formation of this world. And we can be the voice of hope in the midst of a world that too often reveals hatred, tragedies, and evil. God knows we have the potential for more; so God assures us with good news: because we belong to God forever, we are free to live, to love, and to serve. And Jesus, through whom the world witnessed many signs and wonders, reminds us of the power that has been placed within us: "You will do greater works than these." [John 14:12]

We have that capability because Jesus has set us free from the obsession to focus inward (with the worries of having enough, doing enough, etc.): Jesus has made us free to look beyond ourselves. Turning our focus outward, we are able make good news real for others. Being the living, breathing extension of Jesus' ministry, the church is more than an ideology or an institution: it can be the catalyst for change. God partners with us to heal brokenness in world that was created "good" yet struggles to maintain that goodness. The Good News tells us that we have been made free to re-write the script. God in Jesus loved the world so much that he set us free! And if the Son makes us free, we are free indeed. Together, let's use our freedom: we *can* change the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.