

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

October 31, 2010 - Reformation Sunday
Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They 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"?'

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

SERMON

In 1982 this was the lead sentence in an article about Martin Luther found in TIME magazine, "There are more books in most libraries by and about Martin Luther than any other person who has ever lived, save one--Jesus Christ."

The reason there are so many books about Martin Luther is that the depth and scope of the Reformation is limitless. It affected nearly every area of human life -- political, social, economic, as well as religious. Luther's amazing translation of the Bible not only had a profound impact on faith, but for the first time there was a single, unifying German dialect. The Reformation set forces in motion that rearranged the map of Europe.

People continue to argue over certain historic aspects of the Lutheran Reformation: Did Luther play upon people's distrust of authority and people in authority, or was he instrumental in developing it? Was there a deep sense of individualism before Luther, or did his emphasis on conscience send Germans in a new direction?

What scholars don't debate is what set all the forces in motion. It was simple questions asked by a small town pastor: "Who is God? Is God loving?" This pastor was deeply disturbed by the church hierarchy's teaching about God and how a person could relate to God. Though the Reformation affected every area of European life, it was first and foremost, a theological event. It centered in a discovery about God that we continue to remake in every generation.

The Catholic Church of the 16th Century had managed to make people believe that God was under the control of the Pope, the Bishops and local clergy. They maintained that it was impossible to find God apart from the organization of the church. If you want to communicate with God you had to go through the Church. There was no salvation without the sacraments and the church could withhold the sacraments as a punishment. Only clergy had access to the Bible which were not only few in numbers, but were written only in Latin and Greek, languages most Germans couldn't read.

In his early days Martin Luther experienced God as a tyrannical parent--distant, aloof, and angry. How did he change his understanding of God? By reading the Bible. Had

he not been able to read Latin, Greek and Hebrew he would have gone to his grave thinking of God as aloof and angry. For Luther the beginning was in the book of Romans where he pondered the phrase: The just shall live by faith. He believed that meant that to be just or right with God we need to walk with God, listen to God and allow God to mentor us.

In this week's Sports Illustrated there is an article about Cam Newton, the quarterback for the unbeaten Auburn Tigers. He runs like a halfback, but at 6'6" and 250 pounds, he is built more like a pro linebacker or lineman. Currently he leads his conference in rushing with 134 yards a game. He has a combined 27 touchdowns—14 by rushing and 13 by passing.

Out of high school he accepted a scholarship to Florida, where he played behind Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow as a freshman. One day the University of Florida police came to his room because they heard he had a stolen laptop. He said he bought it from a guy in a car for \$120, though its value was \$1200. The police charged him with burglary, larceny and obstruction of justice, all felonies. After participating in a pretrial diversion program the charges were dropped, but he transferred to a Junior College in Texas. His father, Pastor Cecil Newton, drove his son all the way from Florida to Texas and before leaving him said, "Be the man I raised you to be."

In Texas the football coach mentored him, nurturing his leadership skills, reading "Leadership Is An Art," by Max DePree, a Christian. His life turned around and he had a terrific time in the classroom as well as the football field. A year later he transferred to Auburn where he is a leading candidate for Player of the Year award. He says, "I made a mistake that almost cost me everything. I'm why people deserve second chances."

Lutherans have no quarrel with that, because second chances, or what some call forgiveness, is what the Reformation is about. We all receive second chances. It is God's gift to us. And we all can be mentored. It is fine to be mentored by a coach or another responsible adult, but it is our conviction that somewhere in the chain the mentor needs to be mentored by scripture, for all of scripture points to the mentor of all mentors, Jesus Christ. When the leaders of the reformation talked about Sola Scriptura (the Word Alone) they were saying: don't let institutions mentor you. Don't let priests mentor you, unless they are listening to the word. Let the word mentor you, for the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The word has power. The word power in Greek is *dunamis*, from which we get dynamite. The Word has power to change lives. The Word is effective, terse, pungent, and sharper than a finely honed knife. The Word from God addressed the darkness: Let there be light, and there was

light. And it was good. God spoke again, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters," and it was done. God said, "Let there be lights in the dome, let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind...let us make humankind in our own image." And every time it happened. And when God was finished God said, "It is very good." All of it was done by a word.

As you read scripture you see that God spoke the word and bodies were healed, people were forgiven and people received second chances. The word tells us that God is not an "up there kind of God," but rather a "down here God." In Jesus God arrived "deep in the flesh," and experienced everything we experience. Not aloof, God shared in our pain as well as our joy. He joined in people's celebrations, turning water into wine at a wedding. He was present in the dark moments of people's lives, raising Lazarus from the dead.

How do we draw near to this God? The church before Luther taught that the way you can be right with God is chiefly through external means such as pilgrimages, rituals, viewing relics and praying at Masses. Luther suggested that prayer, worship, hymn singing, living in community and scripture are the keys to a life with God. Especially scripture, because the word feeds those who hunger for God. The word produces changed hearts and helps people realize inwardly the experience of God.

The church of Luther's day said you must do enough. You must pray the right prayers, confess your sins, see holy things and work hard. Luther said, "The just shall live by faith."

Luther's discovery (through reading the Bible) was that we can never do enough. Our anti-God side is so large that we can never make up for what we do wrong. We are always behind. The good news is that God doesn't keep score. Like a friend, a lover, a caring parent, we live with God by trust and faith. At the end of the day we don't say to our beloved--I did fifteen nifty things for you today and you only did nine for me. You owe me. Love throws out the counting machine. God says, "You are always a winner to me." We are saved by God's grace, and our trust, our faith in that grace.

Martin Luther believed that we are involved in a titanic struggle against evil. Evil is real. It takes many forms -- war, murder, violence. It is also devious. In our day the evil one attempts to convince us that there is no such thing as evil.

Many in our day downplay the place of evil in our world. We tease people by saying, "The Devil made me do it." Though most people believe that evil is merely the opposite of good, we testify that there is an evil force working. Ask anyone who has worked for what is right and good in this land, and they will tell you about the power of evil. They will tell you that forces rise up to fight them.

You who have struggled with addiction, those of you who have watched loved ones devoured by the gambling craze, you who have had a loved one do crazy things to

purchase their next hit or buy their next drink, you know about the forces of evil.

You who have watched bright young people consumed by greed, or envy, you believe in the power of evil. You who have witnessed caring people become tyrants when they have power in their hands begin to wonder.

Luther's great hymn--A Mighty Fortress says, "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us. We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot over power us. Let this world's tyrant rage, in battle we'll engage, His might is doomed to fail. God's judgment must prevail. One little word subdues him."

In the end the man who changed the course of history died almost anonymously. Far from home, he lay on his death bed by himself. His dying words might have recounted how he had walked with princes and emperors. He could have told how he debated with the churches finest minds. He could have talked about the 37 volumes he had published. He could have laughed knowing he brought the Papacy to its knees. Instead he leaned forward and said..."We are all beggars."

Beggars. That is what we are. Regardless of how good we are, or what we have achieved, we have done nothing to save ourselves. Luther has taught us that our only hope is to throw ourselves before the mercy of God and beg for forgiveness.

Of course he taught us one more thing that is even more important. God loves beggars. Amen. © 2010