

*Reformation Sunday*

October 28, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 8: 30-36)

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 forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This past week, I received an unexpected text message from a young man named Jack. Now, Jack grew up with my son. They were in scouts together all through high school, and they both ended up in the bay area near San Francisco. And Jack's parents have been good friends of ours for a long time. So I got this text from Jack. I don't think I had ever heard from Jack before. But, anyway, I got this:

"Hey, Cindy, this is Jack Smith. I hope you're doing well! Hannah and I are working on wedding plans, and we're wondering if you would consider being our officiant? The wedding is August 3rd, 2019, at my parents' house in Minnesota."

Now, I have a tendency to over-think things, so my first thought was: "Hmm, a wedding of a family friend. Haven't done that before. Am I getting myself in trouble?" But then I decided, no, it's fine. And so I sent back, "Sure, I'd love to."

But I kept over-thinking it. And I remembered that Jack's parents are Roman Catholic, and this wedding is going to take place in their backyard. And so I sent to him: "Hey, just checking. You're okay that I'm a Lutheran. Right?"

And he replied, "Yes! It's totally fine. We were agnostic, but we'd love to have a conversation about what you would be comfortable with."

Okay. So now I could be over-thinking that. But really where the conversation led me was to think about the word “agnostic.”

“Agnostic.” It’s a Greek word. Right? And it comes from the root “gnostic.” And I’m going ask for a little help here with some words. Don’t worry, you don’t have to say anything. Come on up. The root of the word is “gnosis.” To know. And then in Greek, if you put an “a” in front of a word, it makes it the opposite. Kind of like putting an “un” in front of something in English, so you get the negative. So, “agnostic” means to not know, to not know. In our search for meaning, we all have this tendency to fluctuate between the two. Wanting to know, knowing we can’t know. Sometimes we lean toward the gnostic.

Wouldn’t you love to know what God is up to? I mean, honestly. Wouldn’t you love to have some of the answers to your great questions appear in the sky, so you know what’s going on? “Do this, and everything will turn out great.” Wouldn’t you like to see that? To know. “I want to know your plans, God. I want to know how you work. I want to know what you intend.”

In the Second Century there was philosophy — or heresy, depending on who was looking at it — called “Gnosticism.” And Gnosticism said you can attain perfect knowledge. You can become divine and know all things. You can leave this material world behind and become one with God, as you learn more and know more, and know more about God. To know all things. Perfect wisdom.

Today, we still yearn to know more about the future, about God’s plan, about my place in the world, about the meaning of life, about the problem of suffering and evil. It would be nice to have some answers. Gnosis.

On the opposite side of our search for meaning is agnosticism that says we can’t know God. We can only know what we can see or prove. It’s a philosophy that developed during the scientific revolution. We can understand the world. We can analyze and know things about the world. But we can’t know God. We can’t prove God. We can’t disprove God either, so you have to allow the possibility that God exists. But we can’t know God in any significant way. God is unknowable.

And, yes, there are the times when we lean toward agnosticism. You know, when we start wondering about miracles. Really? Turning water into wine? Changing the chemical makeup of water by just speaking? Or healing? If God heals those people back then, why doesn’t God heal people today? Or take away pain? Maybe it’s true that we can’t ever know God. Unknown. Agnosticism.

Between the ways of knowing and the ways of unknowing lies the way of faith. “*The righteous shall live by faith.*” That was one of the great discoveries, or re-discoveries, of the Reformation. Saint Paul says: “*We are justified by God’s grace as a gift received through faith.*”

The Book of Concord – anybody know what the Book of Concord is? Nobody knows what the book was. The Book of Concord is all things Lutheran. It's Lutheran doctrine and theology in a book form. It's the Book of Concord. The Book of Concord says, "We are saved by grace through faith for the sake of Jesus Christ."

Now, faith is a wide river. And we flow between the known and the unknown in our faith. But faith comes from a different place. Faith comes from the place of experience. Faith includes some learning and knowing. It includes some mystery and unknowing. But it comes out of our experiences with a faithful God. It comes from a place of trusting a promise. Faith is living within God's promise of fidelity.

Faith is living within a promise of God's fidelity. What does that look like? What does it look like to live within faithfulness?

Yesterday, I was at my favorite coffee shop, working on my sermon as always, and I became fascinated with the people sitting there in the shop. There were a number of parents and children there.

Back there, there was a mom and her high school son, and they were both wearing these neon blue jackets with the logo for Special Olympics. He was sitting there with his arm around her. And it was pretty obvious that the two of them were stopping for a little something before they went off to a competition, him as a participant, her as his biggest fan.

And then right up here there were two couples, and each couple had a toddler, sitting on a parent's knee. And those parents were very gently helping them eat, playing with them, guiding them, restraining them when the shrieks became a little overwhelming. But caring for them.

And then there was a dad over there who was telling stories to his kids and making faces in the stories. And the kids were hanging on every word.

Then there was a dad right there. He was listening intently to his middle-school aged son who was pouring out his heart. It was obvious this kid was dealing with something, and dad was listening so carefully to everything he said.

The man at the table next to me was watching me watching them. And he said, "It's an interesting group in here, isn't it." And I said, "I am fascinated with these parents and their love and faithfulness to their children." And he said, "You know, I've got a paper here." He had yesterday's paper. And he said, "And it's got a bombing in it, and a murder, and some bullying." And he said, "Do you know what? There is a lot more of this" — pointing to the room — "there is a lot more of this in the world than what's in my paper."

Faithfulness. That kind of relationship from a parent to a child, a spouse to a spouse, a friend to a friend, that can hold us, and shape us, and embolden us. When we experience that kind of faithfulness, we start to open ourselves up to the other. We start to see through the other's eyes. We start to want what is best for the other.

Now, I know faithfulness can be broken in this world. Parents are not always good parents. Spouses are not always faithful spouses. And friendships can be betrayed. But imagine a faithfulness that has lasted through generations. Imagine one so faithful to provide abundance for ages, to provide guidance through the generations.

Imagine one so faithful, so committed, that he will not lift a finger to strike back when we are at our worst, when we hang him on a cross. Imagine such a relationship of support, and forgiveness, and encouragement, and gifting, and faithfulness.

Living within that is what we call faith. Living in the faithful promises of God. Being shaped, upheld, and gifted by these promises. Having the freedom and the strength to risk, knowing that we are held by the faithful one. Seeing through the eyes of Jesus. Offering respect and devotion to this one who loves us.

We live by faith. Not by knowing or unknowing. By experience in faithfulness, we live by faith.

So thank you, Jack, for getting me started thinking about knowing and unknowing and faithfulness. And thank you to the reformers who remind us and reform us and send us back into this faithful, trusting relationship over and over.

And, most of all, thank you to the faithful one for helping us know what it means to be loved and to be faithful.

Amen.