

I was getting my hair cut yesterday, and as I was getting ready to leave I mentioned I was going home to write a sermon, my hairdresser asked what I was going to talk about. I said, “Well, it's Reformation Sunday.” To which she responded, “What's that?” I don't think her response is unusual. Even for most of the Church, today is the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, the color of the day is green and the scripture readings are completely different from the ones we just heard. This is a peculiarly Lutheran holy day. If you've been raised in the Lutheran church, this may all be very familiar. But for those who were not, it can be a mystery. And even for dyed-in-the-wool Lutherans, this day presents some challenges.

Of course the basis for this day is the historical fact of Martin Luther's famous posting of 95 theses, or points of dispute with the Church, on the door of the chapel at Wittenberg University in 1517. And there's a ton of historical information about the birth of the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath. But this day isn't primarily about history. And it certainly should not be a triumphalistic victory dance or a claim to be the one true expression of Christianity – as if we've gotten it all right and can pat ourselves on the back. It is about the continuing renewal, change, transformation of the Church. “Ecclesia semper reformandum” - the Church is always in reformation.

But what does this day mean to us in our daily lives? And what does it mean to people outside the church, to seekers, to the “spiritual but not religious”? Can this day be more than a relic of the past – or do we have something to offer all people? What is at the heart of this ongoing re-formation process? Reading the lessons for Reformation Sunday, we can see that there is a theme that holds them together – and that is freedom. Especially in the gospel where Jesus says, “If you live according to my teaching, you really are my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Well, that sounds pretty innocuous; who doesn't want to be set free? Except for the fact that we can be in as much denial as the people around Jesus were: “We've never been the slaves of anyone!” - conveniently forgetting their long-ago exodus from slavery in Egypt as well as their current occupation by Rome. But you know, even if we are not in literal slavery, we're all in bondage to something. What is it that holds you back from living life in all its fullness as God meant you to do? Our answers will be different: an addiction, an inability to let go of a painful past, an unrealistic expectation of another person or situation, or an emotion like fear or anxiety.

In the old Lutheran Book of Worship, the confession said: “We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” We tend not to like that language because we have so over-emphasized our so-called “sinful” nature and focused narrowly on our willful and blatant wrong-doings. But it is so much more than that. The meaning of the word translated as “sin” is “missing the mark” and encompasses all the ways we both willfully and unwillfully, knowingly and unknowingly, consciously and unconsciously subvert our purpose in life – which is to be completely immersed in the Sacred presence, fully attuned to Spirit, living in absolute harmony with the will of the Divine.

We know how much we miss the mark. I think of Martin Luther's *anfechtung*, what he called the times of overwhelming terror, despair, and spiritual crisis that he experienced throughout his life. Today we might call it clinical depression, but the label doesn't matter. Anything – spiritual, emotional, physical - that keeps us from the fullness of joy is our *anfechtung*, that sin from which we need to be freed.

But how? John has Jesus saying, “If you live according to my teaching, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” I was curious about the wording of this translation. In the original Greek, “live according to my teaching” is the same word that is elsewhere translated in John as “abide.” Remember: “Abide in me as I abide in you” and “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

This verb “abide” means to remain, stay, live, dwell, continue, last, endure, stay connected to. It occurs 40 times in the gospel of John, so it's a big deal. So I found it odd that most translations didn't use it. Interestingly enough, the New King James Version is the only one that does: “If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed.” Maybe because it's rather an old-fashioned word.

New English Translation: “If you continue to follow my teaching, you are really my disciples . . .”

New International Version: “If you hold to my teaching . . .”

New Revised Standard Version: “If you continue in my word . . .”

Bible in Basic English: “If you keep my word . . .”

New Living Testament: “. . . if you keep obeying my teachings.”

The Message gives it an interesting spin: “If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure.”

But they don't get at the same nuance as “abide.” The Jerusalem Bible comes closer: “If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples . . . and you will be free.” Remember also that in John, Jesus is the Logos, the Word made flesh. So what the writer of John is saying is that “if you make your home in Christ, if you live in the Logos, if you dwell in this manifestation of the Holy One – you will be free. This is not mere semantics. This is taking being a disciple out of just following teachings, obeying rules, keeping commandments - all good things – but abiding, being at home in Christ is so much more. Which is what Luther discovered. You can obey all the laws and do all good works and still be burdened by *anfechtung*. Abiding is about being present to the presence of the Sacred in all times and in all places, being at home in Christ.

Although in reality, maybe it's easier to follow teachings, obey rules, and keep commandments. I mean, how can I be present to the Sacred when I find it difficult to be present to myself? How can I be at home in Christ, when I can't be at home with myself? William Brosend, from the School of Theology at the University of the South, writes about coming back from sabbatical and being asked what he'd learned that would help the church. He said: “The most important thing I learned is how to breathe in and breathe out. I now know how to sit quietly for a few moments and breathe in and breathe out, and I am learning how, in those moments, to be aware of how Jesus sits with me and loves me. I imagine myself “reclining” like the beloved disciple, sitting with Jesus and abiding in his love.”

I wonder how his academic supervisors reacted to that? So non-intellectual; so “spiritual but not religious.” But doesn't it sound like a wonderful learning? That is but one picture of how one person has learned to practice the presence of God, to abide in Christ. One thing we are realizing more and more is how different types of people find their connection to Spirit in different ways. At the conference I attended this past week, we were discussing possible future retreats. Someone suggested making soul collages or some kind of art as prayer. It seemed like half the room lit up and said, “Oh, yeah!” and the other half groaned and said, “Oh no!” One woman spoke of her love for baking and the spiritual meaning that it's become for her. Another spoke of finding her connection to Spirit in nature. Another in the Eucharist and in the community of the church. Another in music. Another in silence. I've found the labyrinth to be a valuable tool; I find that I'm more attuned to moving meditation.

There are many ways to go about this abiding. But the first step is to acknowledge the reality of our slaveries. In order to take seriously Jesus' claims about setting us free, we also have to take seriously the fact that we're all enslaved by powers beyond our ability to control. And that sometimes they can grab hold of us and try to choke the life out of us, pretending that they are more powerful than the presence of God within us. I like the little book by Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*, because we do need the practice – not as a saving work we do to bring God closer to us – but as a saving work that Christ, the Logos, does within us.

So – Reformation Sunday. We remember Martin Luther being set free from his *anfechtung*, even as he set the Church free from some of the abuses of its day. As we continue to contemplate what the Reformation looks like today and what the Spirit is calling us to challenge and change and transform, we look to our own *anfechtung* and open ourselves to be challenged, changed, and transformed in the process.

This is the Reformation, the re-formation, the transformation – the freedom we can offer to others in the name of Christ who liberates us.

Amen