

John 8:31-36    Reformation    10.24.24    Bill Uetricht

During the last decade or so of my mom's life, she and I would end up frequently in conversations about the past, particularly about the past that involved her raising of children. And the conversations normally came about because of something that her grandkids or great-nephews or great-nieces had done, something that in her mind wasn't the least bit helpful. She would say to me, "I never had any trouble with you kids."

Really, Mom? I know you didn't have any trouble with me. Who would have trouble with me? But Patty was a real pain. She tested your patience day after day. And Susan and Patty fought all the time. And they fought with you. I'd run to another room because I didn't like the fighting. And you didn't have any trouble with your kids? Mom, can you say amnesia?

We human beings have a tendency to forget, especially what we want to forget. Americans, for a wide variety of reasons, are particularly gifted at forgetting. We want to go forward; we don't have time to get tied down by remembering the past. It's been only four years since 2020, the year of COVID. And many of us have forgotten how truly horrible that year was, the time when bodies were being stored in refrigeration units because there were just too many to deal with. Those were awful days, but we're quick to forget them.

Jesus is having a conversation with those who have forgotten. The gospel of John describes these folks as Jews, probably better translated as Judeans, that is, Jews from Judah and Jerusalem, not Galilee, where Jesus is from. The book of John is probably a serious dialogue between different groups of Jews, not between Jews and Christians. John wants the Jews who reject Jesus to change their ways.

Anyway, the Judeans in today's story are said to be Jews who *had* believed in Jesus. They had believed in him, but they hadn't remained

with him. They had given up on Jesus. The going got tough, and they left the movement.

To these folks, Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” If you hang in there with me, if you go to the deeper places with me, you will experience the truth, and in the gospel of John, that is Jesus himself, and you will have freedom.

Well, these folks who *had* followed Jesus, react to Jesus’ words: “We are descendants of Abraham.” In other words, we have the right pedigree. We come from the right stock. We have status and value because we come from the right family. And besides, Jesus, we have never been slaves to anyone, So, how can you say that we will be made free?

Mom, can you say amnesia? You are in Jerusalem right now, where there is a freedom festival going on, the festival of the booths. If you weren’t enslaved, why are you here for a party that helps celebrate that you have been set free? Did you forget about the slavery in Egypt, the oppression by the Assyrians and the Babylonians?

Free, huh? You are just like the Americans who think they are free because they can do whatever they want whenever they want to, say whatever they want, choose among 5000 options for toothpaste. Free, you Americans are. And yet, you have one of the highest addiction rates in the world. And in the developed world, you have the highest rates of gun violence. You all forget or fail to understand how bound you really are.

And Jesus said to those who *had* believed in him: “Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

You think you are free, huh? You think you have the right pedigree. You are addicted to sin. If you weren’t, why do you keep doing it? If you are so doggone free, why do you keep doing the same

destructive things, why do you keep turning your back on the love that God is revealing in Jesus?

Sometimes the biggest problem we have in life is that we just can't admit the truth. Those who live well with addictions realize that. They get better only when they tell the truth. Jesus today says that the truth will set you free. Now he's talking about himself there. But I think his words can apply to life in general. The truth sets free. The lies we tell ourselves only serve to entangle and bind us. And the truth is that we are bound up in sin, and running from it doesn't help us.

Now Paul has a different take on this sin thing than does John. But as he struggles to make his point about how the Gentiles, who once were thought not to be a part of the people of God, can become a part of the people of God, he reminds his readers that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Nobody is left out of the sin club. We're all included. So don't go telling a lie to yourself that you have a special place because you aren't as messed up as other people. Sorry! You are messed up just in a different way. Get off your judgmental high horse.

And by the way, this message may initially feel like bad news. And in some ways, it is. But it is fundamentally good news. We're all in this mess together. When you grasp that, not only do you become more compassionate to other people, but you become more honest with yourself. And honesty is generally the means for getting better. Until you realize that everything isn't everybody else's fault, until you know that sometimes you are the problem, until you say that you have many reasons to seek forgiveness, you will stay stuck in your mess. Mom, amnesia doesn't serve you or us well. Your family was messy, just as everybody else's is.

I have to tell you, though, mom and everybody else, that the good news doesn't stop with the truth telling about our sin. That good news is a stop along the way toward the really good news. Paul puts the really

good news this way: “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift,” through the messiness of the cross of Jesus. In the cross of Jesus God gets messy with our real lives and yet embrace us with love.

Again, Paul is dealing with how the Gentiles, who once were thought not to be a part of the people of God, are now considered an integral part of the people of God. And his conclusion is that they become a part of the people of God through God’s gift, just as the Jews have been given a special through God’s gift of grace.

Here is the secret to the power of the Reformation. Here is the secret to a Lutheran understanding of the faith. Here is the truth that will truly set free. The most important things in life do not come from you. They are not a matter of your accomplishment or your achievement. Forgiveness is not earned or paid for. Your worth as a human being is not something you get by how much money or education you have, or how well you do in people’s polls, or how moral or rebellious you are. Your worth doesn’t come as a result of your vices or your virtues. Your worth is sheer gift. You were baptized into the story of Jesus, into the messiness of his death and the gloriousness of his resurrection. You came out of those waters as beloved children of God.

That is who you are. Of course, you are messed up. Of course, you are addicted to sin, but you, broken as you are, are embraced by a love that will not let you go. By grace you have been saved.

Here is the bottom line, mom. What matters most in life is grace. It is grace that gives us life. It is grace that sets us free. It is grace that gives us permission to tell the truth even to ourselves. It is grace that connects us to God and other people. *All* have sinned. But *all* are justified by God’s grace as a gift. We are not only in the chaotic and messy sea together; we are also in the ocean of grace together. So

when people are busy trying to tear us all apart, resist. Jump into the ocean of grace and take a good, long swim.