

Reformation and Confirmation Sunday 31 October 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34 / Psalm 46 / Romans 3:19-28 / John 8:31-36

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Welcome, confirmands and confirmation families this morning! We are very proud of you, and how you confirmands completed your instruction and projects during a pandemic. Thank you, families, for your encouragement and support; thank you, congregation, for your prayers; and special thanks to the teachers and leaders who guided and instructed as you've learned more about your faith and the church over the past three years.

The definition of the word "confirm" is "to strengthen together," so in church context, confirmation means strengthening together our faith and practices. Today you are affirming (saying yes, that's right) the baptismal vows your families and sponsors made on your behalf.

This affirming takes place on Reformation Sunday, a great day in the church year to confirm your beliefs and your love of God. The readings from the Bible we heard this morning emphasize renewal and relationship, so it's a fitting time to affirm your baptismal vows, that are all about your relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

In our first reading, from the Hebrew Scriptures, God promises a new covenant with the people. God promises to sustain us and lead us back even when we go astray and find ourselves in dicey situations. God promises to establish a covenant that will not be broken, that will be written on people's hearts. As Christians we believe that this ancient covenant was embodied in the coming of Jesus Christ, and it promises that nothing we can do will ever put us beyond God's saving help.

Our psalm reading today is the text that Martin Luther used to write the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which we'll be singing in a few minutes. It has the image of a peaceful city, which Christians see as symbolizing the Church, with Christ at its center.

The Reformation Day second reading comes from the book of Romans and summarizes the gospel that meant so much to Martin Luther. We hear about righteousness in Jesus Christ as the reading teaches we are saved by faith in Christ, not by religious practices or good deeds.

These passages each describe a restored relationship with God that is marked by forgiveness. And on this festive day we remind ourselves that our Church needs to always renew its faith in God's grace, just as our confirmands are renewing their baptismal vows.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus makes a connection between truth and freedom. We learn about freedom, and insecurity, and the power of love.

FYI, freedom in the Bible isn't defined quite the same way that we might define freedom. Jesus tells those who believe in him that "The truth will make you free!" Martin Luther and the other reformers would love that, as the Reformation is rooted in the belief that we are freely given God's grace – it's a gift received and activated by faith. We freely receive what's needed for salvation, and we're freely sent forth to direct our energies, not toward ways of earning God's favor, but to love our neighbor.

When Americans hear the word "free" we may associate it with independence or autonomy. What freedom means to some of us might even be "I have the right to do whatever I want." But Scripture says that's not freedom at all; it's another kind of bondage, to the vain pursuit of actualization through self-gratification and self-assertion.

The problem with going that route is, we weren't made to live as isolated individuals, separate from the needs of our neighbor as we each go after personal satisfaction. We were created to find our true nature - our calling and purpose - through our relationships with others. We were made for each other.

And the freedom Jesus describes in the gospel isn't just freedom *from* sin; it's also freedom *for* service and a life that's oriented toward God. In one of his writings, *The Freedom of the Christian*, Martin Luther explains that those who believe in Christ are both "perfectly free"

and “perfectly dutiful servants,” freed from guilt and shame, and free to love and help their neighbors.

When we talk about sin, often it’s the plural, sins, as in bad things we’ve done. But in Scripture sin is more of a force, a power that robs people of abundant life, and it’s a condition we can get trapped in. The condition of sin is very much a state of insecurity, being afraid or anxious that we’re not safe, that we’re not sufficient, not worthy of love or respect.

Being caught in our insecurity – sin – precedes most if not all of, our sins. We may do bad things because we feel bad about ourselves. When it comes to individual sins, the harmful things we do, the only responses are to punish them or forgive them. But the person is left still stuck in the condition of sin unless we deal with that underlying insecurity.

The only way to deal with insecurity is with love. Think about it: when was the last time you felt completely loved and accepted, worthy of respect, full of confidence, and you still felt tempted to sin?

Jesus offers freedom to the believers and, feeling insecure from the implication they’re not free, the believers answer we don’t need Jesus’ freedom because we’ve never been slaves.

They kind of forget the whole time in Egypt and then wandering in the wilderness.

Our human attempts to justify ourselves are what the Reformation was about. Self-justification, also called “justification by works,” is about our attempts to go it alone, to define ourselves on our own terms, to find our place in the world by our own means and devices.

Some examples of self-justification – in the first century, maybe it was ignoring or denying that God was doing a new thing in Jesus Christ. Later on, in the Middle Ages, say the sixteenth century, it was using religious mechanisms to supposedly guarantee peoples’ places in heaven. And maybe today it looks like amassing sufficient wealth, status, or privilege to create the illusion of a meaningful life. What these all have in common is wanting to build for ourselves an identity that’s independent of our relationship with God.

But we cannot establish ourselves on our own; we’ve done great harm to each other trying to. Too often we compare ourselves to each other, and either we establish ourselves on the back of our neighbor, or we experience someone doing that to us.

God’s response to our behavior isn’t judgment. No. God who knows us better than we know ourselves, knows all our attempts to justify ourselves through our accomplishments. God loves us just as we are. God not only forgives the sins we commit, but promises us unconditional love, acceptance, and regard. We are raised to new life, as we discover that not

only do we deserve love and respect, we've been given these things by the creator of the universe.

This morning we rejoice with and support our confirmands. God promises you that you are God's beloved child and writes it on your hearts. We pray God keeps their faith strong throughout their lives. We pray the Holy Spirit comes into their lives so their faith never falters. We pray that Jesus remains with them always, to the end of the age, as promised in John's gospel reading today: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Amen.