

“IT IS GOD WHO IS AT WORK IN YOU”

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Quasi Reformation 1), October 1, 2017

First in a series of five sermons in observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Five hundred years ago this month, a professor at Wittenberg University posted a document on the door of the Castle Church, inviting debate on an idea he had. Martin Luther was not setting out to reform the church. Nor did he or his followers succeed in reforming the church. He did stir up a whole lot of trouble.

What he was doing, and what he continued to do as long as he lived, was complain. According to one scholar, the total thrust of Luther's life's work was a complaint against horrible preaching. The word of God, he contended, was being used to hurt the very people it was intended to heal. The gospel was being used not as a liberating tool, but as a frightening weapon.

I will be using the pulpit this month to examine the idea that was at the heart of the Reformation. The idea was quite simple: Do not homogenize the Word of God. Perceive the difference, and the precedence, of the gospel. Then God is able to give us freedom and peace, and work in us by his Spirit. That is to say, Do not read the Bible as though everything in it was a sort of instruction or command, telling us what is expected of us. Instead, notice when the voice of God in scripture makes a promise or offers a free gift—that is, the gospel. Make the distinction.

I will preach a little differently this month, making my background thinking more explicit. I want you to see why it makes a difference, and what that difference is, when you employ the key principle that was at the heart of what is commonly known as “the Reformation.”

One of the texts I will use all month is the set of banners Linda Henke designed and Betty Carr

constructed, which you see above you. They are Reformation banners, celebrating the burning issue at the heart of the 16th century discussions. They declare, first of all, that God is Trinity. We declare that in order to make clear that the Good News about Jesus is not just a “Jesus thing.” It is the express work of God the Father who formed humankind in his own image, from the dust of the earth. Furthermore, the work of Jesus is perpetuated and made local in the work of God's Holy Spirit working within us. Linda expresses in vivid color the activity of God in three persons: Energetic activity in creating us; energetic activity in saving us; energetic activity in the Holy Spirit.



All of that energy and activity finds a focal point in the cross of Jesus Christ, as you can see in the middle of the word “re+formed,” as well as in the deep red cross that traverses the design, intersecting in Jesus' hands. It is God who formed us, it is God's Son by whom we are re+formed; it is the Holy Spirit of God who has transformed and continually transforms us according to God's good pleasure.

The second text (besides the banners) I use will change each Sunday as I use the gospel appointed

for each Sunday, employing Luther's theological principle to identify and experience the gospel no matter what we read in Scripture. My goal will be to distinguish, as clearly as I can, how God's reforming and transforming work in us is a function not of homogenized Bible, but of the gospel of Jesus Christ seen in Scripture.

Away we go:

Jesus told a parable about a man who had two sons. One promised obedience but did not deliver. One was rebellious, but ultimately obeyed.

Where is the good news for us, in this text? If we were not looking for good news, we might extract a simple moral and be done. The moral of the story would be: Empty talk means nothing; actual obedience is what counts. That's how to be a better person. End of story. Go home and do likewise.

But our gospel probe is not satisfied, because nothing in that interpretation is "gospel." It is only one more rule by which we may judge ourselves. Either we give ourselves a passing grade and pat ourselves on the back; or we give ourselves a failing grade and kick ourselves.

Such a reading of the parable also makes no use of our faith in Jesus, since we can hear that rule for behavior from many other voices—including our parents and our bosses.

So where is that "re-forming" which is a gift of God? Re-forming happens when the rebellious son (v.29) becomes different. "He changed his mind and went."

What was Jesus talking about in real life, when he talked about people changing their minds? In verse 31, he says "tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." He does not say "they are changing their ways," although I'm pretty sure they were. He says they were believing him and going into the kingdom of God.

Jesus was talking about the work he was doing, which is re-forming people. He is telling people: "Look. This is available. The forgiveness of sins was making highly improbable people into full citizens of the kingdom of God!" And it was his gospel calling which was changing people's minds—not their own willpower. [I need to strongly caution you against making too much of the fact that the story says "he changed his mind." You and I are of the conviction that the kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to God—and the re-forming is God's work here, in Christ.]

That takes care of the second banner. Where is the first: Where is the "forming" God behind this re-forming work of Jesus?

Jesus discusses that before he tells the parable. The whole point of telling this parable was that people doubted that the things Jesus said and did had actual authority. To which Jesus replied cleverly. If you look at the dialogue in verses 23-27, you will see that Jesus hints at but refuses to outright claim that his transforming work has its origin in (the creative work of) almighty God. It comes from heaven above. And of course, it wouldn't have settled the question if Jesus had said "I have God's authority." It would have begged the question. So he dodged the direct question, while leaving no doubt in the mind of those who would believe that he was speaking for God.

So, the re-forming work of Jesus has its authority in heaven above. How about the third banner?

The Holy Spirit is evident in God's transforming work within and among us. When the second son "changed his mind and went," we realize (if we think about it) that the purpose of the Father was not just to get changed minds, but to get the vineyard taken care of. There was work to be done. When it says, "he changed his mind and went," it means he went into the vineyard in his work clothes and did the Father's bidding. Reformed into another sort of

person, his life was transformed to produce what God wanted produced.

Which takes me out of the parable to the second reading, from Philippians. In a heavily trinitarian passage, including a beautiful hymn in verses 5-11, Paul tells us how God works in this world. How we may see God in the world. He sums it up at the end with a verse worth memorizing--which is why I will be coming back to it every week.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only when I was watching, but even more now that I am not watching, let your salvation become productive, with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Thus Paul describes what happens when we stop thinking of the Bible and the Word of God as one lump, and as a test we have to pass; and start focusing on the good God does in us through Jesus and for his sake. It is not we who work to please God, but it is God who is at work in us, enabling us not only to work but to want to work for the pleasure of God, whose purest pleasure, whose only pleasure, is that none should perish, but that everyone should live in and for him, forever. To use the old catch phrases: we are not "justified" by what we do; we are "justified"—i.e., "reformed and transformed" by God working in us through our faith in God.

- The **forming** belongs to God—who made us in the beginning.
- The **re+forming** belongs to God-in-Christ -- who overcomes sin and death to restore God's image within us.
- The **transforming** belongs to God's Holy Spirit -- who, through the peace of Christ, empowers us to walk in God's ways and participate in God's own work.)

Amen.

A Sermon by Rev. Marcus Felde, Ph.D., pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

