

Reformation Sunday

"Our God of Mercy"

Deuteronomy 4:29-31; Ephesians 2:1-10

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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It seems the church just loves a good party. THIS PAST MAY, the Church Universal—that is, the Church At-Large All Over the World--celebrated its birth on Pentecost Sunday, the day in which the Holy Spirit fell upon the 120 early believers gathered in the Upper Room as described in the book of Acts. THEN LAST SUNDAY, the Deer Creek church celebrated its 222nd anniversary since her founding way back in 1802 with a cake in the social hall following the service. This morning, ALL CHURCHES CALLING THEMSELVES PROTESTANT can celebrate THEIR birthday, their 507th. ON THIS DATE IN THE YEAR 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses (or propositions) on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church thereby launching a movement that has come to be called “the Protestant Reformation”- a religious earthquake that would go on to change the world. It was an attempt to reform many of the corrupt practices the Catholic Church had descended into beginning with the sale of papal indulgences, a practice which allowed people to buy forgiveness for their sins. He believed this undermined the TRUE meaning of repentance as the Bible was clear that FAITH ALONE was the path to one’s salvation and not works or the purchase of phony credits. So I say to all Presbyterians this morning along with such denominations as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and OTHER Reformed bodies, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY”!

Luther came to this realization when he discovered through prayer and studying God’s word that God was not some fire-breathing tyrant who couldn’t wait to bring the sword of

judgment down upon the head of anyone who disobeyed his laws. He knew from his OWN heart and conduct that he could not keep God's laws perfectly and that none of his OWN works would ever be enough to atone for any of his actions. It wasn't until he grasped his God was at heart a God of LOVE AND MERCY that all his doubt and despair, all his darkness and frustration would end and he would enter into a WHOLE NEW relationship with the divine. As he would write about that experience:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the justice of God', because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that the 'just shall live by faith'. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

He went on to add, *'If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his*

Fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.'

Luther renounced all attempts to create or earn his own standing before God, recognizing that it was nothing but filthy rags in his Lord's sight. Through faith and NOT works, he found himself robed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone and in perfect union with his God. That was when his life as a Christian REALLY began!

I ask you, has there ever been a time when YOU thought of God as some "heavenly policeman," ready to strike you over the head with his baton the moment you performed some transgression or infraction, REGARDLESS of how small or innocent? There are many religious faiths all over the world which to this day CONTINUE to promote such a characterization of the Divine and that even includes MANY CHRISTIAN denominations, AS WELL. Long ago, there was a period in my OWN life where I was a member of a very conservative and legalistic denomination. At one point, I even served on the staff of a church which promoted all kinds of fierce rules and regulations and which made one feel as though it was through our ADHERENCE TO THEM that our acceptance before God lay. To their mind, there was a clear distinction between what was "of God" and what was "of the devil," what was of "heaven" and what was of "this world". You were discouraged from such innocent activities as playing cards, going to dances or visiting the movies (unless, of course, it was a Billy Graham film). Certainly drinking, smoking, or even the very thought of pre-marital sex was considered a definite no-no. And because the church regulated our lives so strictly, we thought that it was simply expressing the WILL OF GOD HIMSELF through such prohibitions. The irony here was that when you

DIDN'T do such things, when you demonstrated tremendous self-control and refused to indulge in such "sinful" activities as THEY defined them, you convinced yourself that you were a MUCH BETTER CHRISTIAN than those "WORDLY" Christians WHO DID, that you were in fact a MUCH SUPERIOR CHRISTIAN than THEY were! But more on that LATER.

The great inspiration and motivation behind Luther's reformation was his discovery that service to God ultimately lay, NOT through one's adherence to a bunch of formally prescribed laws such as the PHARISEES advocated and who Jesus never stopped criticizing for their sheer hypocrisy. Rather, it was that service to God was based first and foremost on a RELATIONSHIP based in love- a love that was both free and unconditional. God took the initiative in this relationship and any love we might feel for God could be nothing more than a response to his INITIAL act of love towards US- a love that culminated in the sending of his only begotten son into the world to save us from ourselves. As the disciple John wrote in his First Epistle, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that HE FIRST LOVED US, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."(4:10) When Luther firmly realized that ABOVE ALL, God was his HEAVENLY FATHER, a FORGIVING God full of LOVE AND MERCY, it caused him to be UNRESERVEDLY LOVING AND MERCIFUL towards OTHERS. THAT DISCOVERY became the REAL reformation- one beginning in his head and his heart and lead to a WORLD-WIDE RELIGIOUS reformation which would eventually change all of history!

Nowhere do we imitate God MORE or become MORE "CHRIST-LIKE" than when we freely demonstrate mercy towards OTHERS as undeserving as WE have been. From out of the deep reservoir of God's love flows the gift of God's unconditional forgiveness to persons as unworthy as you and I may be. But if we REFUSE to demonstrate the same kind of mercy and

forgiveness that God has for US, then it throws into question whether God's love has taken root in us TO BEGIN WITH. We receive God's mercy, not when we are good, that is, when we are at our very BEST, but when we are at our ABSOLUTE WORST- when we are MOST miserable, when we are MOST helpless, when we are MOST wicked and ungodly and MOST powerless. God showed US mercy while we were yet HIS ENEMIES, that is, when we were disobedient, unrighteous, foolish, ignorant, and suffering. But THEN, instead of turning his back and wiping his hands clean of us, God took the UNPRECEDENTED act of JUSTIFYING us, FORGIVING us our sins, EXTENDING mercy to us, and FILLING us with his own righteousness and goodness. And NOT because we EARNED it or were in any way DESERVING of it! Rather, God loved and saved us IN SPITE OF ourselves, IN SPITE OF our sin, REGARDLESS of how dark our hearts may have been. Pure and simple, that is the gospel—the “Good News” which is the story of our salvation! Listen to what scripture has to say about God's mercy:

“Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful.” Luke 6:36

“Therefore he (Jesus Christ) was obligated in all things to be made like his brothers, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people.” Hebrews 2:17

“Behold, we call them blessed that endured: ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, how that the Lord is full of pity, and merciful.” James 5:11

“But he, being merciful, forgave iniquity, and didn't destroy them. Yes, many times he turned his anger away, and didn't stir up all his wrath.” Psalms 78:38

“He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered. Yahweh is gracious and merciful.”

Psalms 111:4

“Yahweh is gracious and righteous. Yes, our God is merciful.” Psalms 116:5

“Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, ‘Return, you backsliding Israel, says Yahweh; I will not look in anger on you; for I am merciful, says Yahweh. I will not keep anger forever.’” Jeremiah 3:12

“Tear your heart, and not your garments, and turn to Yahweh, your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and relents from sending calamity.”

Joel 2:13

But in the biblical sense, God’s mercy is so much MORE than letting the offender off his or her deserved punishment and EVEN MORE than just sympathizing with another person. In his commentary on *Matthew*, the great Biblical scholar William Barclay describes “mercy” as “the ability to get right inside the other person’s skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings.” Says Barclay:

Clearly this is much more than an emotional wave of pity; clearly this demands a quite deliberate effort of the mind and of the will. It denotes a sympathy which is not given, as it were, from outside, but which comes from a deliberate identification with the other person, until we see things as he sees them, and feel things as he feels them.

In his epistles, the Apostle Paul tells us that God showed us mercy when he abandoned the prerogatives of heaven to become human, deliberately identifying with us in every way.

Through Jesus Christ, God literally got inside our skin and as a result subjected himself to every feeling and sensation, every problem and want that you and I can possibly experience.

Therefore, it can never be said that God does not understand our joys and our sorrows, our tears and our fears, our loneliness and rejection, our hungers and our thirsts. God even understands

DEATH ITSELF for in and through the life and death of his son, he experienced EVERY ONE of these things; Christ becomes our proof that God does INDEED understand! As it says in the book of Hebrews:

“Therefore he (Jesus Christ) had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.” (Hebrews 2:17-18)

Yet as convincing as all the scriptural evidence is, we in the church have always had a hard time accepting this fact, HAVEN'T we- that is, believing that as a result of God's mercy, we really HAVE BEEN forgiven- once and for all time. Though we confess from the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," more often THAN NOT, it remains a confession of the HEAD rather than of the HEART, an affirmation of the MIND instead of a TRUTH we avowedly stand on and live by. Some of the most joyless and unhappy persons I have ever known are those who ALSO call themselves “Christians.” Sunday after Sunday, they come to church to hear the Good News of God’s grace and love. Yet, once the service has concluded, they develop a case of SPIRITUAL AMNESIA- they return to punishing themselves for past offenses by letting guilt and shame and self-recrimination to dominate their thoughts once again. As much as they might desire it, they seem INCAPABLE of allowing Christ’s message of forgiveness and reconciliation to take root and penetrate their hearts. And why IS THIS?

For many children of God, there exists an impediment that hinders us from yet experiencing the RICHNESS of his divine love, that obstructs us from the full-range of emotional and spiritual freedom he desires for us and that is our PRIDE. You see, for us to

confess, "Father, I have sinned against myself, against you, and against a brother or sister- HELP ME!" we must FIRST be able to admit to ourselves that we ARE wrong and that we ARE in need of the very help God extends to us. This, however, is something that human pride will not allow us to do. The Bible has called "pride" the WORST of all sins for it deceives us into thinking that we are smarter, stronger, better looking, and more righteous than we REALLY ARE. Pride believes the lie of the Serpent- that we shall be as gods. Pride shields us from who we really are as helpless, vulnerable, spiritually-corrupted persons and substitutes for this reality the many lies and myths we believe and continue to perpetuate about ourselves. Pride leads us to believe that we are SO good, that we don't even NEED God, that we can get on in life WITHOUT ANY divine help. Or if we DO admit that we need God's help, pride forces us to accept it on our OWN terms and not God's- that we will then earn it, work for it, and not accept it FREELY and UNCONDITIONALLY which is the ONLY way God offers it to us.

Thus, before any of us CAN come to the point of recognizing our need for God and his forgiveness, before we CAN be brought to confess, "Yes, Lord. I need your help!" it is our PRIDE that must be dealt with. However, to do so, we first have a couple of requirements that we must satisfy before we can come to the place of accepting God's mercy. The FIRST is that we initially see ourselves as NEEDING God's mercy. This becomes the FIRST obstacle pride presents that must be overcome- RECOGNIZING OUR NEED. You see, to accept God's offer of forgiveness, we must first admit to ourselves that we ARE wrong, that we HAVE committed an offense against God and our brethren. We need to recognize our guilt and take responsibility for it- this is seeing ourselves as we REALLY are. Our natural inclination, however, is to cover ourselves, to preserve our righteousness at all costs, to blame someone else for our problems

even as Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience before God. Only by standing ALONE in God's presence and allowing him to reveal to us what HE HIMSELF SEES, will our hearts ever be opened up and our real motives exposed. It is extremely painful, seeing ourselves as we truly are, but only THEN will we ever come to the place of recognizing our need of divine mercy.

The SECOND requirement for accepting God's mercy is not only acknowledging our need of it, but giving up all efforts TO JUSTIFY OURSELVES. Our human lives are all filled with guilt and deep inadequacy. Self-justification is the way in which we prove to ourselves and others that we don't need grace, that we're capable of standing upon our OWN two feet. We use our jobs, our social standing, our possessions, our friends, our sacrificial activities to confirm how good or how successful we are when, IN REALITY, all we are doing is using them to MASK the tremendous guilt we feel. Not until we abandon such efforts and accept our guilt will we then turn to God and accept his offer of mercy and forgiveness. The old self with all its protective devices must die and be stripped from us before the NEW can take its place. When we realize that God accepts us IN SPITE OF OUR GUILT AND INADEQUACY, we can then give up our fruitless efforts to justify ourselves and accept God's mercy.

You see, what makes God "gracious" in the FIRST place is that he first comes to us and accepts us JUST AS WE ARE- as dirty, selfish, greedy, proud creatures, full of addictions; that he loves us, forgives us, and desires to break the chain of old habits and illicit desires that have bound us for years. However, this requires us to first step out in faith and accept that through his son, Jesus Christ, he HAS forgiven us and reconciled us to himself. We must take God at his word on this and TRULY BELIEVE it! We can never earn this love or work for his forgiveness. We must receive it in the only way it is made available to us and that is freely and

unconditionally. Our God is One who loves us with an everlasting love who promises that NOTHING will ever separate us from either his presence or his love, and the HIGHEST EXPRESSION of that love is the constant offering of his own mercy- for you, for me, and for the WORLD. There can be no reason to ever fear God for fear generates anger and eventually hatred- a hatred towards God but ESPECIALLY a hatred towards OURSELVES. We end up despising ourselves for the constant guilt we feel over the failure to live up to what we perceive are God's impossible demands and expectations for us. The fact is that our God can only be LOVED and HE CAN when we realize that God's unalterable nature IS to love and how he FIRST accepted us and CONTINUES to accept us JUST THE WAY WE ARE, WARTS AND ALL! And when we discover that truth, the SAME truth that MARTIN LUTHER did, then WE TOO can expect to see a reformation begin within OUR lives AS WELL. We will then learn to serve him properly by loving him in return, by loving ourselves even as he loves us, and by unconditionally loving his world and the people in it- all with a love that is attributable to the mercy of God alone. Let us pray...

Lord, as we look into the mirror of your truth, we see ourselves as we really are, and it is not a pretty sight. We remember Christ himself said, "If you give a cup of water in my name, you do it unto me." Lord, how many cups of water have we given in your name? How much mercy have we had for the poor? How much mercy and compassion and forgiveness do we extend to our brothers and sisters in Christ, perhaps even here within our own fellowship? Help us all to remember how much mercy you have shown us that we ourselves might live accordingly. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.