

Reformation C (10/27/2019)

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Faith comes from the firm inscription of God's liberating word on our hearts. If it's a law, it's the law of love – not of our love for God, but first of God's love for us. And, as a matter of the heart, it's no wonder that faith is adaptive. This is bad news for anyone who wants perfect clarity from God and perfect faithfulness from God's people. But, it's good news for a church that is always being reformed.

Special thanks to Boe Woodbury and Resounding Joy for your offering of
“Moses and the Perfect 10!” Bravo!

Alas, even Moses had trouble with the rules.

What is it about written rules that invites us to break them? Is it the restriction that rules place on our sense of autonomy? Is it the thrill of pushing the boundaries, of discovering what we can get away with? Is it that we're simply predisposed to stumbling, that our willpower is just not strong enough to measure up to God's expectations? In any case, a consistent theme of our faith is that God's people miss the mark. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul concedes in our second reading from Romans, so “there is no distinction.” It's the human condition.

But, another consistent theme of our faith is that our failures don't repel God. **God establishes and reestablishes us in grace, never forsaking but always forgiving and renewing us.** For followers of Jesus, it's a promise that comes to expression in his life, death, and resurrection. Yet, it's a promise long

foretold. In the early sixth century before Christ, at a time when the walls of Jerusalem were leveled, the temple was in ruins, and many in Israel were led away in chains to the land of their conquerors, the prophet Jeremiah clung to a vision of hope:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The sign of the first covenant, the law of the Lord inscribed on stone tablets,¹ had not secured the people in faithfulness and peace. So, the Lord promised a new sign, a law to be inscribed not on the exterior but the interior, written on their very hearts.

And, if God's word is written on the heart, it cannot be denied. Those who are drawn to Christ in every generation sense something of God's ancient promise in him. **Jesus is the word of God incarnate, a word inscribed on our hearts. And if that word is a law, as Jeremiah insists, it's a law of love – not of our love for God, but first of God's love for us.**

In an effort to capture the significance of Christ for us, Martin Luther calls him "a mirror of the Father's heart."² **The reflection of God's deepest desire, to restore the world God so loves, instilled at the deepest level of our intuition**

¹ Exodus 34.

² *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 440.

- this is the essence of the new covenant God makes with us. Joining God's heart to ours, God claims us forever as God's own. And nothing, not even death, can separate us.³

For Luther and the Reformers, this truth was too important to allow it to be buried beneath the institutional abuses of sixteenth-century Christianity. Of particular concern was the church's sale of indulgences, or promises of salvation written on paper. Again, people of faith were being taught to adhere to an external inscription, not of divine origin this time but human. And, as the church fleeced the poor in order to line its own pockets, the good news of God's free grace was lost.

So, Luther insisted on faith alone. Only faith can grasp God's good word, a word that is not restricted to stone tablets or the pages of a book, but by the gift of the Spirit takes root in the innermost self. "Faith is the yes of the heart," Luther writes, "a conviction on which one stakes one's life. On what does faith rest? On Christ.... and this faith does everything...."⁴

Faith is the yes of the heart.

What better illustration of this insight than Luther's own seal? In a 1530 letter to Lazarus Spengler, Luther explains the significance of the imagery at the center of the seal:

The first should be a... cross in a heart, which retains its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. "For one who believes from the heart will be justified." Although [the cross]

³ Romans 8:38-9.

⁴ *What Luther Says*, Vol. I, 466-7.

mortifies and [causes] pain, it leaves the heart in its natural color. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive.⁵

Dear church, **faith comes from the firm inscription of God's liberating word within. And, as a matter of the heart, it's no wonder that faith is adaptive.** "Theology is reasoned, systematic, orderly," writes Frederick Buechner, "whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises...."⁶ This is bad news for anyone who wants perfect clarity from God and perfect faithfulness from God's people. But, it's good news for a church that is always being reformed, a church that is always on the lookout for God to raise us again with Christ and call us to something new.

⁵ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 49, 356-9.

⁶ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2019-10-27/20136#resources>.