

“Participles of Faith”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost • Proper A25 • 29 October 2017
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Text: Romans 3:19-28

St. Paul makes a passionate appeal to both Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. We can abandon any claims based on our achievements. God's goodness alone is our hope. Jew and Gentile are on a level playing field and God's generosity is unlimited towards both. Today's reading is from *The Message*, a translation and paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. Let us prepare ourselves for the Word of God as it comes to us in the reading of Holy Scripture.

We're All in the Same Sinking Boat

¹⁹⁻²⁰ [Now we know] that whatever is written in these Scriptures is not what God says about others but to us to whom these Scriptures were addressed in the first place! And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else? Our involvement with God's revelation doesn't put us right with God. What it does is force us to face our complicity in everyone else's sin.

God Has Set Things Right

²¹⁻²⁴ But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity [God] put us in right standing with [God's own self]. A pure gift. [God] got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where [God] always wanted us to be. And [God] did it by means of Jesus Christ.

²⁵⁻²⁶ God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with [God] through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history! God sets things right — [and] also makes it possible for us to live in [holy] rightness.

²⁷⁻²⁸ So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting [God] set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade.

1

He was undoubtedly an enthusiastic young man. Filled with restless energy, with a restless eagerness to learn. And what an extraordinary capacity for learning! Mind you, he did not enjoy schooling: actually compared it to purgatory and hell. His father wanted the youngster to study law, but law was unappealing: too much uncertainty. Evidently he was on a quest for truth. His name was Martin Luther.

It didn't happen all at once. But in late 1517, Luther wrote a letter protesting the sale of indulgences. An indulgence was a kind of financial instrument: if those two words in today's context raise your suspicions, you're on the right track. The indulgences of the 16th century were instruments sold by the church; the asset that lay behind them was sometimes called a promise of justification; sometimes called passage to heaven. In modern terms: a card to get-out-of-hell-free. In the words of a functionary of the church who represented what Luther disparaged and despised: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

The papacy had become, in a way, exactly what St. Paul sought to overturn, and Jesus before him, and the prophets before him. From the inside perspective, the church was the guardian of the truth of the faith: the truth only existed within its structure and its witness. But Luther saw in the church a profoundly human institution, whose good was being overwhelmed by a drive to survive. Something essential had been lost.

If you could pay the church to free you from purgatory or hell, God became small: a merchant peddling forgiveness for a price.

What was lost, Luther saw, was the centrality of God's power, always and infinitely more able than human power. And while acting faithfully matters, what sets us free, Luther insisted, is what God does, rather than what we do: the grace of God in restoring us to wholeness when we have wandered from God's embrace.

It's a story about being set free. In church-y terms it's a story of justification by grace. And justification by grace is a story about being set free.

2

Once upon a time a poor but honest jeweler was arrested for a crime he never committed. He was placed in a high and well-protected prison in the center of the city.

One day, after he had been imprisoned for months, his wife came to the main gate. She told the guards how her husband, the poor jeweler, was a devout and prayerful man. He would be lost without his simple prayer rug. Would they not allow him to have this single possession? The guards agreed that it would be harmless and gave him the prayer rug. Five times daily he would unroll his rug and pray.

Weeks passed, and one day the jeweler said to his jailers: "I am bored sitting here day after day with nothing to do. I am a good jeweler, and if you will let me have some pieces of metal and some simple tools, I will make you jewelry. I ask for little—just something to fill the idle hours and keep my skill in practice."

The poorly paid jailers agreed that it would be a good arrangement. Each day they brought the jeweler some bits of silver and metal and some simple tools. Each night they would remove the tools and metal and take home the jewelry that he had made. Days

grew into weeks, weeks into months. One bright morning when they came to the jeweler's cell, they found it empty! No sign was found of the prisoner or how he had escaped from this well-protected prison.

Some time later, the real criminal was arrested for the crime the poor jeweler had been falsely accused of. One day in the city's bazaar, long after that, one of the guards saw the ex-prisoner, the jeweler. Quickly explaining that the real criminal had been caught, he asked the jeweler how he had escaped. The jeweler proceeded to tell him:

His wife had gone to the architect who had designed the prison. She obtained from him the blueprints of the cell doors and the locks. She then had a design woven into a prayer rug. Each day when the jeweler would pray, his head would touch the rug. Slowly, he began to become aware that there was a design, within a design, within another design, and it was the design of the lock of his cell door. From the bits of leftover metal and his simple tools, he fashioned a key and escaped! ¹

On the surface it's not really a story of justification by faith, is it?

But in a way, we are all locked up by something in this life.

- Some of you know friends or family who are locked up the terrible prison walls of addiction.
- Some of you have been locked by depression, a disease that threatens to kill the soul, or been close to someone who has been in that prison.
- For some of us, anxiety locks us away: fears that the life we longed for is slipping past, that death is encroaching, and our faith in what comes after is less than confident.
- We certainly know what it is to be locked up by ideology: can't look at the newspaper or listen to radio or TV without an onslaught of ferocious opinion that rarely leads to mutual, caring relationship.
- Sometimes we get locked up by self-interest: as a clever preacher once said, there's no smaller package in the world than a man wrapped up in himself.

3

The Reformation began because the church of Jesus Christ, too often, was exacting a price for setting people free from what locks us up.

Years ago the church had too much power, and powerful men (not so much the women) bound the faithful to their own will. They justified a system that extracted money from people this life, in exchange for promises of heaven in the next life.

It's a touch ironic, I suppose, that we get a reminder of the problem of indulgences on a day when our congregation is gathering our pledges. But actually, the timing is good. Just to make it plain: with *our* pledges we are not actually buying anything, least of all a get-out-of-hell-free card. Quite the opposite. The best way for you and me to give is to do it as an expression of

¹ "The Jeweler," in William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers* (John XXIII Press, 1998), 253-4.

what place God occupies in your life. Where my treasure is, there will my heart be also. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. I want your heart and mine as close to God as possible.

I'm not telling you that God is at work exclusively in our church. But God is doing holy things here. I know it is so because people from this church are feeding the hungry, and visiting the frail, and comforting the grieving. I know God is here because you are seeking out opportunities to learn about God's radical inclusiveness: that each person is beyond price and worthy of love. I know God is here because we laugh together, cry together, and lean on each other. I see God using us, to carry a message of grace and healing and wholeness. And so I give joyfully, not because I must but because I may.

4

Five centuries ago a bright young man, disillusioned with schooling, restlessly searching for certainties, read and prayed so deeply that the Word of God broke through the hardened walls of the church. That Word is breaking through still.

Today there are hundreds of reformed denominations. Not just reformed, past tense, as though the work were over and done. Reformed and reforming: past participle and present participle.

- Reformed and Reforming, because even if we're no longer selling indulgences we still get hung up on thinking it's our goodness that gets us into heaven, instead of God's goodness. Doing good things won't cause God to love us; doing good things is what happens inevitably when you accept that God loves you — and especially loves every hungry, hurting, impoverished, captive, left out, left behind, pushed aside person. We're reforming, so we can remember church is not about focusing on us, it's about the living Word of life.
- Reformed and Reforming, because we still get sidetracked by sin, we cling to things that aren't God — church ideas, or church buildings — and we forget to look for God in each other, and so we're in need of that missionary zeal of Martin Luther and all the reforming faithful women and men who came after.
- Reformed and Reforming, because every once in a while we get attached to doing church the way we did it five hundred years ago, or fifty years ago, or five years ago — and we forget that God in Christ is always doing a new thing and calling us to follow.

For all of Luther's break with the Catholic church, today I count us blessed that the faithful in our sister church are bound for freedom, as we are. I still hang onto a note from a classmate in my doctoral program — a Roman Catholic priest — who wrote to all his protestant classmates:

Reformation Day is fast approaching, and I wish to send greetings to all my friends and colleagues in the preaching ministry on that day. I join you in your commitment to the purification and renewal of the Church, and to the deepest fidelity to Jesus Christ. I look forward to the day that we can celebrate this day, and all days, in complete and comprehensive unity – if not in our time, then in God's time and in God's Kingdom.

May it be so.

5

Reformed and Reforming: follow Luther's lead, and take the Word of God into your heart as though it were written exactly for you — which it was.

Reformed and Reforming: follow the lead of the faithful of all the ages in remembering that God loves you exactly as you are, and loves you too much to leave you that way.

Reformed and Reforming: follow the Spirit who is renewing the church in 2017 with as much hope as in 1517.