

Always Reforming

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Reformation Day - October 25, 2020

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, John 8:31-36

SCRIPTURE READING Jeremiah 31:31-34

“The days are surely coming,” says God I AM WHO I WILL BE, “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 betrothed. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days: 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says I AM WHO I WILL BE; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 46 (adapted from Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*)

The Beloved is our refuge and strength, a tender presence in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam, and mountains tremble with its tumult.

Blessed One, you know all hearts.

You are always with us; may Love guide our lives.

There is a river whose streams make glad the Holy City,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
The Beloved is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
our loving Creator is an ever-present help.

Blessed One, you know all hearts.

You are always with us; may Love guide our lives.

Though nations are at war, economies laid low by pandemic;
Yet the voice of the Almighty is heard, breaking through hearts of stone.
Come, behold the works of the Beloved;
how Love reigns even in humanity’s desolation.

Blessed One, you know all hearts.

You are always with us; may Love guide our lives.

For the Beloved yearns for wars and anguish to cease,
shining light into fearful hearts, loving even those who resist reform.
“Be still and know that I am Love.”

Wake up; befriend justice and mercy.

Blessed One, you know all hearts.

You are always with us; may Love guide our lives.

John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

These days, when I go for my annual physical, they give me three words and ask me to try and remember them for two minutes. I think they must think I'm getting old, which is somewhat disconcerting. Today I'm going to give you three words to remember. Ready? Refuge. Truth. Freedom. Got them? If you forget, no worries - you'll hear them again.

When my sisters and I visited our father CJ during his final hospital stay, we asked what hymn he'd like us to sing. He requested something that was not in our usual repertoire: "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." The refrain goes like this:

Safe in the arms of Jesus; safe on his gentle breast;

There, by his love o'ershaded sweetly my soul shall rest.

It seemed like a strange choice for our father, who was such a dynamic person, vital and energetic. He loved "wheeling and dealing," and that was how he lived his faith, too - exuberantly, until the very end, when he was content to rest safe in the arms of Jesus and look forward to seeing God face to face from that front-row seat.

Where in this crazy world can you find refuge like that, or like Tommy Dorsey expressed in "Precious Lord"? Last week, I ran across this quote from Caroline Stephen: "What...I wanted in a place of worship was a refuge...from doubts and controversies; not a fresh encounter with them." If I, your pastor, ever introduce too much controversy into our Sunday mornings, I count on you to let me know! Ms. Stephen brings her point home by referring to "the conflicting views of truth, with which the air just now is thick."¹ Ah, isn't *that* the truth? So many versions of truth fly about these days! But here's a fact: Caroline Stephen was writing in 1890, in England, nowhere near today. Here's another fact: as a Quaker, she found her refuge, her truth, and her freedom in silence. Maybe silence is the best sermon. If you agree, you are free to mute me and seek your truth in silence. I'll never be the wiser. For the rest of you, I'll keep talking.

Truth may be hard to pin down, but amnesia makes it harder. Jesus tells the Jews who are just starting to believe in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." They are clearly suffering from memory loss; they insist they are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves. Wait, what? What about

¹ Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds*, 1890. Quoted in *Daily Readings from Quaker Writings, Ancient and Modern*.

Egypt and the Exodus and the manna? What about getting the 10 Commandments? What have we spent the last two months talking about, if not how God used Moses to free Abraham's descendants from slavery? But Jesus identifies a new kind of servitude: slavery to sin. Sin, not in the sense of small meannesses and individual oh-ohs, but in the capital S sense, the Sin of forgetting God, forgetting the One who is their refuge and strength and help in trouble, forgetting they belong to God and to each other. Only God, Jesus says, *is true*. Faithful. Reliable. Real. Genuine. Love. To forget that is serious memory loss. And it leads to loss of freedom.

To explain that, here's a lesson in Lutheranism 101: Martin Luther had the brilliant insight that people can't choose God, God chooses people. All people. You. Everyone. God loves everyone. You can't get around it. In that sense, you are not free - you *can't* make God not love you, or even make God love you less. We are bound to God. We are free in that we have choices about how we respond to God's love. We are free to love each other: family, friend, or foe. We are free to love the leaf-strewn ground beneath our feet and the rain-washed (or snowy) sky above. We are free to ignore or abuse them. But when we forget that we are intimately connected to all of these, we are slaves to Sin. As Luther said (and this is sort of a Lutheran koan or riddle), "The Christian is perfectly free, servant to none; and perfectly bound, servant to all." Meditate on that!

Back to Presbyterianism: the Spiritual Pilgrimage on anti-racism that the Presbytery is undertaking is exposing some painful truths about who we are as Americans, and as Minnesotans. Clearly, we, too, suffer from collective amnesia about the way some settlers and the US government mistreated those who walked this very earth before us, and watched this same sky. I won't go into details right now, but this truth is easy to verify and it's actually not even controversial. It's just neglected. Our pilgrimage leaders insist that the point is not to make us feel bad or to blunder about trying to fix old mistakes. The point is that acknowledging the past will set us free to live more truthfully in the present, to re-form our lives on a better plan.

The words I asked you to remember today come straight from the classic Reformation texts. Here's a mnemonic device to help you remember them (a mnemonic is a memory aid. It's a cool word). It starts with Jesus' arms offering you safe refuge. It continues with the truth, the love that comes straight down from God to you, without your asking for it or deserving it. And the last movement is freedom: you are free to live that love horizontally, in your world. It is the simplest mnemonic in the world - the sign of the cross. Refuge, truth, freedom, refuge. We are called over and over to re-form our lives in the shape of the cross. That's what Luther did, and Calvin, and George Fox, founder of the Quakers. They remembered. So did Caroline Stephen, when God, speaking in the silence, led her to care for the multitude of people in poverty in her world. The beauty of a mnemonic like this is that your body, your heart, and your spirit remember even when your mind forgets. As God promises through Jeremiah, "I will write my law on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people."

Let me tell you a story about that. About ten years ago, I used to visit a dear soul named Teresa. She had been a devout Catholic, a good and loving mother, a generous and compassionate woman. But dementia had robbed her of everything except the drive to walk around and around her facility. She hadn't spoken a word for two years. Week after week, I visited. She never looked at me and she never stopped walking. So I walked with her. I called her by name, and sang old familiar songs like "Jesus Loves Me," and "In the Garden," or even, "Daisy, Daisy." I said familiar prayers like the Lord's Prayer and "Come Lord Jesus," and "Now I lay me down to sleep." I would tell her how precious she was to God. Sometimes I wondered, why on earth am I even doing this? Eventually I left that job and that town; I had the hard task of saying goodbye to all the people I visited. On my last visit to Teresa, as we were walking, I said, "Teresa, I'm so sorry I won't be coming to see you anymore. But I want you to know that God loves you and God will always be with you." And Teresa stopped, and turned, and looked me in the eye. And put one hand on her chest, and made the sign of the cross with the other. Refuge. Truth. Freedom. Written on her heart, deeper than memory.

I suppose I may forget Teresa someday. I may even forget my father. You may forget things and people you've known, too. But you may take refuge in this: God will never, ever forget you. This is most certainly true. You are free to live in love. Amen. TBTG

Prayers

**Precious Lord, you are our refuge. Your steadfast love is our truth, and in you we find the freedom to love others, not only in words but in actions. Let our receiving and our giving show the world that you indeed are God, the God who saves us.

**God of the ages, and of our youth and our age. Give discernment and passion to all young people, who must deal with the consequences of another generation's errors; give faith and security to the old, when action is no longer an option. And give strength and courage to those between, raising families and carrying on the work of the world.

**We pray for our country: may our united ideals outweigh our bitter divisions, and rectify past mistakes, as we seek to re-form ourselves to be a nation where all people can thrive, no matter what their color or ancestry may be,

**When we just want to turn off the news and shut out the turmoil, give us the calm commitment to help as we can, and above all, to pray: for those with covid and those caring for them, including Louis's brother and family, my friend John, and... And for bereaved families everywhere; for governments seeking ways to cope; for teachers and students, struggling to find new, safe ways to learn; for prisoners and for all workers whose jobs expose them; for those who have lost homes in wildfires, and for refugees from wars and natural disasters; for our precious, endangered planet and all who share it; for those whose names and circumstances are close to our hearts, and for those whose names and circumstances we may forget--we are confident that you remember. As always, we pray in the name of Jesus, and as he taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven...