

Reformation Sunday
October 30, 2022
Text: John 8:31-36

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When our boys were little, they loved Legos. We probably invested a small fortune in a variety of Lego kits, especially the Legos Star Wars kits. Each new box of Lego pieces would be brought home with such joy! I would usually help with interpreting the instructions and finding all of the different building blocks for making all sorts of things. It was always fun to see the final product taking shape, and it was even more fun to see the kids' delight with what we built.

One way of imagining what Reformation Sunday is all about is this: today we give thanks to God for some of the essential building blocks of our faith and life as people of God. I brought some Lego blocks this morning to help us imagine how we build a vital and meaningful faith. Unfortunately, we don't have an instruction booklet that shows how everything goes together. Instead, we have these building blocks that have been passed down to us through the generations. Maybe you've seen how parents or grandparents found strength and comfort and wisdom in the way they put the pieces of the tradition together to make a home for hope and gratitude and peace. But each one of us will need to put the pieces together for ourselves. Fortunately, the Reformation gives us some crucial, if not "directions," then maybe at least "hints" for how to proceed.

The first, most basic building block for us is Grace, and if there's any piece here that looks like Grace to me, it would be this one (show large flat piece). Grace is our foundation, it's what everything is built on (begin attaching smaller pieces). Grace is what keeps us grounded, and it's a gift. Grace is God's undeserved favor and goodness. Simply being alive is a gift of God's grace. In fact, every good gift of creation and community comes to us by grace. As Lutherans, we recognize that we could never earn God's grace, we can only receive it, trusting that God loves us and provides for us, all out of God's goodness and kindness, and when we stumble, God reaches out to us with mercy and compassion.

Everything important in life, then, is connected in some way to Grace. And because we experience grace first of all through the story of Jesus, Jesus helps us see a very definite shape to how all these building blocks of life and faith go together (show Legos formed in a cross). The sign of the cross reminds us that life is all about loving God and loving others—and not a sentimentalized kind of love, but a self-giving way of living that is truly out of step with our me-first culture. So when we wonder what to do with pieces like freedom or vocation or community, Jesus shows us how they are all meant to be opportunities for showing love. Everything about our lives as individuals and as a community is shaped by love. So when Jesus says in our Gospel reading that he comes to set us free, we know he means free to live with love for all of God's children, free even to love our enemies.

Some of the building blocks we have come to us in the form of stories (show additional Lego pieces as I put them on). The Bible is a whole book of stories and letters and poems about how our ancestors in faith learned from God how to live with compassion, how to live as a contrast

society to the world around them. Sometimes they failed miserably, but other times they achieved something so beautiful that it still shines across the generations so that we can see it—like when the prophet Micah sums up the life of God’s people as doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Those are the kinds of building blocks we really want to hold onto!

We also have stories about Martin Luther and his effort to call the church back to living by grace. For example, when we celebrate this last Sunday in October as Reformation Sunday, it’s because it was at the end of October, 1517, that Luther nailed a list of 95 articles for debate to the church door in Wittenberg, spelling out some specific ways he believed the church of his time had lost its awareness of the centrality of grace. Luther’s story reminds us that God is always renewing and reforming the church, always calling us to a deeper appreciation of how love is the beating heart of a genuinely human life.

There are other stories, too, about people like St Francis of Assisi, who modeled a profound love for the whole of God’s creation. Or there’s St Nicholas, who was such an amazingly generous person that even our very secular society associates him with gift-giving at Christmas time. Or there’s Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who died as a martyr for his resistance to Hitler and the Nazi regime. His story shows what faith and courage look like. And there are so many more. In fact, you probably have your own special people you look to—maybe ones you’ll give thanks for next week on All Saints Sunday—people who have showed you what faith and love and steadfastness look like.

There are other building blocks that are basic faith practices, like prayer and gratitude and worship and singing. They become part of the daily or weekly structure of our lives. And on a day like this, how could we not focus on singing? Our tradition has so many wonderful composers, like Johan Sebastian Bach and Dietrich Buxtehude, who used the gifts God gave them to offer praise to God and give a witness to God’s love and grace. I wonder what hymns help you feel the love of God, or hear the call of Jesus to follow in his way of compassion and forgiveness.

When I’d pull out the box of Legos at home, I’d often find that some of the pieces had been mistreated, or they’d gotten chewed on or something sticky dripped on them so that they were just gross. I think the same kind thing is true of the building blocks of faith. We have these words and images and stories that we use to try to express the inexpressible, to speak about the wonder and mystery of this life with our Creator. And they’ve all been passed down to us by generations that have gone before. And some of them have been misused and maybe even broken. For example, the word “Christian” has gotten stained by judgmentalism and prejudice, so that a lot of people think it means anti-gay and narrow-minded instead of following Christ’s way of love. I wonder if there are parts of the Christian tradition that you look at and think, “Eww.” I think that’s OK, because even if we are inspired by the faith of our parents or grandparents, we’re not trying to rebuild their faith. We’re working at building a faith that will help us follow Jesus’ way of compassion and forgiveness now, a faith that can direct us for living with hope and kindness instead of fear in the face of the challenges of our time.

Now, if you look at what I've been working on here (show Legos), you may notice some things that look recognizable, like the cross, but the whole thing doesn't look particularly finished or complete. And the truth about all of us is that we are always a work in progress. God's grace is at work in our hearts and in our imaginations, and hopefully we can see that we're growing in how we follow Jesus' way of love, but there's always room for God to do something new with us. We are creating a life that is grounded in grace, and expressed with generosity and courage and compassion in all our relationships. Sometimes, with all of the business of life, it can be difficult to keep our focus. That's why it's such a gift that we do this work together, as a community, where we can encourage each other and support each other. Being children of the Reformation reminds us that all of this is by grace, and for that we give thanks to God. Amen.