

Reformation Sunday
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-38

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Portland, Oregon
October 29, 2023

“Am I good enough?” It’s a question we ask in all different ways. We ask it when we go for a job interview, when we apply for a loan. We ask it when we look in the mirror. When we face a tough decision. When we’re struggling – but also when we’re successful: “Am I good *enough*?”

Someone called it “existential insecurity” – the way we humans tend to be fearful and anxious that we are not safe, not sufficient, not worthy of love and respect. When we let insecurity drive us, we end up doing all kinds of things to justify ourselves. We work too hard for money or status. We stay too busy, because we think being busy means we’re racking up points on some great scoreboard in the sky. We try so hard to be good, to be right, to stay in control, to prove we are valuable. We’re really looking for love and respect and acceptance, but we won’t find it there.

A friend of mine is a very good listener. She’s struck by how many conversations she’s been having lately with people who are just hungry to be known. Hungry to be heard. Hungry to be accepted, just for who they are. People are asking, *Am I good enough? Do I matter? Am I worthy?* And as much as we can encourage each other, the answer we all are seeking is one that finally comes only from God.

And there is good news for us. God’s love doesn’t depend on our accomplishments, or our failures. God’s grace, God’s unconditional love, is so immense it completely overshadows every human achievement, and God’s love also overshadows every human sin. There’s nothing we can do to make God love us more -- and, this is incredible -- *there is nothing we can do to make God love us less*. God loves us all *infinitely*, as treasured children. This good news can settle our minds and center our hearts. This is grace, and it’s the essence of what we celebrate today, on Reformation Sunday.

“Am I good enough?” was a question that plagued Martin Luther. 500 years ago, the church had strayed a long way off course, so far that a popular fundraiser was selling indulgence certificates which were essentially a “get out of purgatory free” card. You could actually purchase a certificate of salvation for yourself or a loved one. It wasn’t cheap, but it was popular. A questionable but very lucrative strategy!

Martin Luther protested this, on the basis of scripture. He was first and foremost a Bible teacher. Early in life, Luther was plagued by one thing: He felt he could never satisfy God. Luther was brought up believing that God judges sinners and punishes them. He was sure he could never pass God’s judgment. Luther did everything he could think of to make himself right with God. He fasted, he prayed, he confessed, he did penance, but

he found no relief. It's been said that Luther's conscience was "an unforgiving monster"—and actually Luther saw *God* as an unforgiving monster. (J. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, p. 84)

Luther's careful study of scripture changed his view. Poring over the Psalms and the book of Romans, Luther became convinced that truly we cannot save ourselves. Instead, God does what we can never do. God saves us and makes us holy through Jesus Christ, as a free gift. God justifies us, sets us right with God, through the free gift of eternal love made known through Christ, who died and rose again to overcome sin and death forever.

Convinced of this, Martin Luther challenged the practices of his church, and the history books tell the rest. The Reformation reshaped both the religious world and Western civilization. But it's revealing to realize that Martin Luther never saw himself as a church reformer. Luther taught that God is the only reformer.

And today, it is God who reforms our lives -- that is, God *re-forms* our lives -- on the basis of grace. That unsettling question of "Are we good enough?" receives its final answer in God's infinite forgiveness. Yes, in God's eyes we *are* good enough. We are forgiven and accepted no matter what. We don't need to be fearful or insecure at the core of our being. Now and forever we are held secure in God's love, and blessed with boldness and courage in the strength of this foundation. God's grace *re-forms* us in marvelous ways, just as it *re-forms* our church and ultimately *re-forms* the world.

I have a friend who didn't grow up religious, but she always yearned for God. Visiting various churches, she often observed practices or attitudes that were judgmental or mean or hypocritical. She already had a pretty low estimation of herself, and this made her feel less of a person. Things changed when she went to a Lutheran college back east. She got to know some classmates and teachers who believed, truly believed and trusted, that they were made right with God through Jesus Christ alone. They struggled with the same insecurities everyone has, but their faith assured them they were acceptable and valuable. It showed, somehow. They didn't have to prop themselves up by putting others down or condemning or judging. That community really radiated God's goodness to my friend—it was the grace-centered kind of place any congregation like ours would aspire to be. And she could not get enough of the good news she found there.

Today her faith is *re-formed*. She says, "God's love sets me free. Free. That means you and I are free in every situation we step into. We are free because we don't have to prove ourselves to God. We are loved already. We are loved forever. We are free to serve others from a place that is not selfish or anxious or judgmental, but instead joyful and outgoing and free."

We Lutherans have sometimes been accused of being passive, more focused on inner salvation than doing what's best for society, or pursuing the justice God wants for everyone. But when we are truly rooted in God's grace and goodness, we want that goodness for everyone. We see the big picture of God's saving love, reaching out to heal the entire universe.

We see how God is out to *re-form* our greedy society, and shift us out of a me-first mindset to pursue what is good for all people. God's grace *re-forms* our view of community and even government. We see that the structures of our common life are meant to serve the neighbor, to improve conditions for all people, not just enrich a few.

God's grace *re-forms* our commitment to the natural world. This beautiful planet is our God-given home. And God's wide, outreaching, saving love persuades us to *re-form* our habits for the wellbeing of all things, waters and soils, fish and birds and insects, creatures and plants of every kind.

God's grace *re-forms* our view of the human family – because in God's expansive love, we all truly belong to one another. Racial differences cannot divide when we view all people through eyes of unconditional love. Lost and suffering siblings on our city streets are not separate from us, we belong to each other. Violence that happens anywhere affects us. War in any place becomes our concern. We all have a stake in making peace.

God's grace *re-forms* our strength and courage to carry us through anything we face. A worldwide pandemic and its rocky recovery. Unpredictable economic times. Life in a nation so polarized that families and communities cannot agree on basic facts or truth. Yet nothing can ever separate us from God's love. So we keep on working to *re-form* mutual understanding across the fractures. We never give up on *re-forming* the human community Christ gave his life for.

We Lutherans understand *re-formation* as an ongoing process. We strive to be an “*ever-re-forming*” church – open and trusting of how God's Holy Spirit prods us forward. Here at First Immanuel, there will be transitions ahead as we pastors retire. Change is never comfortable – it isn't meant to be. But I am convinced that God's grace and unconditional love will never fail this congregation. God will always guide you and graciously *re-form* this family of faith in years to come.

But we can release the future into God's hands. Right now is the moment to trust that God loves us unconditionally. Right now is the moment to let God's unconditional, ever-reforming love flow through us to others. Thanks be to God. Amen.