

October 28, 2018 (Reformation Sunday)
“Big Questions: How Do We Get Free?”
John 8:30-36, Romans 3:19-31, Psalm 46

Shelly and I went to Michigan to visit our son, Michael, and be with his fiancée and her family – and watch a Calvin College soccer game. We were also able to fly our youngest son, Andrew, from San Diego to Grand Rapids for the weekend, and go to church with Michael and Rachel and her family. One of the joys that Shelly and I have had is watching our young adult kids go off to college and find churches of their own. Andrew is part of a start-up church in San Diego, and Michael attends a multi-site church in Grand Rapids. Our two oldest kids got involved in churches when they were away at school and then moved back to GJ . . . and I hear they’re involved in a really great church now. 😊

So the reason I mention this isn’t to gloat about our kids, it’s to tell you that while we were in Michael’s church, in a completely unrelated sermon, Pastor Jeff Manion said something that stuck with me – and in many ways captures the clarion call of The Reformation. Manion kept repeating these three truths: “We Are . . . Desperately Lost, Deeply Loved, and Saved By Grace.” Our passages this morning – and so much of the entire Bible – echo these three truths, over and over again. And these three statements are true, because they come from the One who is Truth. And living lives that embrace these truths can set us free. We are Desperately Lost, Deeply Loved, and Saved By Grace

Those who ushered in the Reformation, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Hus and others, saw what a loss of the truth – or at least an obfuscation of it – could do to an entire Church. When the Roman Catholic Church strayed from these biblical truths, people lost the Gospel-freedom God intended for us to experience in and through Christ. The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day had also strayed from these truths; and people were in all sorts of chains – and didn’t even know it.

N.T. Wright reminds us, “The way to freedom is through the truth, and what matters therefore is to know the truth. Tyranny and slavery of every sort thrive on lies, half-truths, evasions, and cover-ups. Freedom and truth go hand in hand.” (in *Mark for Everyone*). Let’s look at these three truths through the lens of our three lectionary passages.

Truth #1: we are Desperately Lost. This truth isn’t meant to shame anyone. It’s just true. We men may think we don’t need to look at a map or ask for directions; but we know the truth, don’t we? We really don’t know where we’re going, but we can’t admit it. Do you think smart phones have changed this some – that men are less stubborn? The point is, we’re lost! You are and I am. And how is this truth supposed to set us free? If we’re willing to acknowledge our lostness (guess what?), we also get to stop pretending we have all the answers, are always right, and are the expert. Isn’t it exhausting to feel like you have to know everything, prove everything, be right about everything, make it seem like you know exactly where you are?

This truth, that we're Desperately Lost, doesn't mean we don't know anything. You actually might be an expert at math or engineering or environmental issues. You might be a smart spouse or parent. You might know a lot about the classical music of Bach or Beethoven. You might even be versed in the doctrinal truths of the Reformation . . . but you're still lost. That is to say, **on our own and apart from Jesus** every one of us has turned away from the Truth of who God is and what He knows is best for humanity. The truth is we are slaves to sin apart from Christ.

Many of the Jewish leaders of Jesus day were so lost and didn't have a clue how lost they were. "But we're descendants of Abraham. We have never been slaves to anyone." (John 8:33) To which Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) Paul was even more direct about this truth. In his letter to the Romans he just says it: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) And all of this sin leads to a lot of brokenness and pain and lostness and "trouble" and "waters that roar and foam" and "mountains that tremble and shake in the heart of the sea." (Psalm 46) We are Desperately Lost. And denying this first truth robs us of the freedom Jesus came to give.

But just as sure as we can be of this first truth, we can know for certain Truth #2; that we are Deeply Loved . . . by the Author of Love, Himself; the only One who is perfect love. God is "the river whose streams make glad the city [people] of God." (Psalm 46:1) God showed the depths of His love by sending His One and Only Son, who – Paul tells us in Romans 3 – was the sacrifice that took away our sin and lostness and brokenness and offered His love to everyone; Jew and Gentile . . . insider and outsider. The truth is that ALL are Deeply Loved.

In John 8, we definitely see Jesus trying to help His Jewish brothers and sisters understand they're lost (slaves to sin). But Jesus is also declaring that God wants to free them from this slavery and make them his sons and daughters **forever**; He wants them to be the kind of children who know they are LOVED . . . DEEPLY and unconditionally. You are Deeply Loved.

And, if you believe this truth (that you're Deeply Loved) – a truth that's meant to save you and set you free – then Truth #3 is also your truth: You are Saved By Grace. This truth was one of the most important declarations that emerged from the Reformation. Martin Luther was particularly bothered by the practice of indulgences. People were actually paying the Church to have their sins forgiven. Can you believe that? Where's the grace in that? Grace actually means 'free gift' but Luther wasn't seeing salvation by grace demonstrated or declared in the Church he had taken vows to serve. And he called them on it; not to be a rabble rouser but because he loved the Church and wanted to help set it free.

The truth that we are Saved By Grace means that we can be free from the burden of thinking we have to save ourselves. It means we can stop trying to impress God and others with our stellar behavior; stop running continuously on the treadmill of spiritual performance; and stop being so disappointed and exhausted when we fail to measure up and fall flat on our faces.

Being Saved By Grace means we can actually "Be STILL, and know that God is God." (Psalm 46:10) Because of God's grace, you and I don't have to run around to earn God's love like it's a paycheck or report card. Because of grace, we can know that God is "our refuge and strength, a

very present help in times of trouble.” (Psalm 46:1) We can just receive the grace-gift that “the God of Jacob is our [Mighty] fortress.” (Psalm 46:11)

The thing about Truth #3, that we are Saved By Grace, also means we can’t brag about our salvation, or claim we’ve done something spectacular to earn it. In response to the gift of Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, Paul asks, “Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. (Romans 3:27)

One of the passages that impacted Luther and opened his eyes to what was missing was from the book we studied this summer; Ephesians. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9) I’m so grateful that the Reformation brought these three truths into focus. We are Desperately Lost, Deeply Loved, Saved By Grace.

And even though this seems pretty straightforward – 500 years into The Reformation – there’s still a LOT of Post-Reformation Confusion when it comes to these three truths; and I’m not just talking about outside the Church. There’s a lot of confusion in HERE!

Desperately Lost? Really? Isn’t that kind of judgmental and harsh? Isn’t it true that “All people are basically good”? Not according to scripture. Paul says in Romans that God’s holy and perfect law leads to “Every mouth [being silenced], and the whole world [being] held accountable to God.” (Romans 3:19-20)

I love being confronted by the fact that I don’t always believe this truth as deeply as I should; or as deeply as I think I do. In Thursday’s reading in Tim Keller’s devotional through the Psalms – after reading a part of Psalm 116 and a paragraph of his thoughts, the closing prayer gives voice to our ambivalence about this truth. “Lord, when I get into a tight place, my heart instinctively says, “I can fix this. I can handle this.” I think about people to call – but it is all futile. I CAN’T handle life, and the sooner I admit this deep in myself, the sooner I’ll know the peace [and freedom] of always calling on You. Amen.” Let’s be clear about this truth and make sure that when we talk about it with others, we don’t point fingers, but share how it’s true for us – all the while making sure we’re also clear about communicating the second truth.

The problem is that we’re somewhat unclear about this one too. Deeply Loved? “We’ll yeah . . . if you’re loveable; and the more loveable you are the more deeply people will love you.” It is the rare person who lives in the constant freedom of being clear they are loved deeply – by God or anyone else. At best, most of us experience being unconditionally loved in fits and starts. We feel it clearly and then it goes away – OR we revert back to the conditional love we’re more familiar with giving and receiving. The fact that we are Deeply Loved (no matter what) has to be planted deeply into our hearts and minds. It has to be declared again and again. For me, in addition to scripture, God impresses this truth upon me through music. This summer, I found a simple song that I play a LOT. It goes like this: “I find that I’m safe and warm, in Your loving arms. You see me, and You know me, and You love me – Through and Through.” (Will Reagan’s “Through and Through”) You ARE Deeply Loved . . . Through and Through. That’s what grace is all about.

But we're also very confused and have questions about this last truth: Saved By Grace? We get earning kudos for good work and good grades. We get being promoted for measurable results, praised for our obedience and proper behavior. The bonus comes when sales go up. And the Church even makes it seem like the Christian faith is mostly about performance-based living and loving. We're a little lost on the whole grace thing, but it is the cry of The Reformation, and we still need to cry it out today.

Desperately Lost, Deeply Loved, Saved By Grace. Sharing these three truths with others – inside and outside the Church – might be one of the most important things we can do to help them experience freedom.

Martin Luther wanted people everywhere – especially inside the Church – to be set free by these truths of scripture. And thanks to his desire to make the Bible understandable in the people's vernacular (and the invention of the printing press), the Reformation was fueled by people getting to read God's Word for themselves. He translated the New Testament into German in 1517. And we've continued to translate scripture into common languages right up to the present so that people can discover these truths for themselves.

One of the most recent translations of the Bible – one that was written in the spirit of the Reformation and touched many of us deeply – is called The Message. After nearing completion of his Ph D. in Old Testament, Eugene Peterson found that he actually loved being a pastor. So he scrapped the degree started a little Presbyterian church in Bel Air, Maryland. He pastored the same church for 29 years – trying to take pieces of scripture in the original languages and put them in plain English for his congregants. When he stepped down from the only church he ever served, he worked on the whole Bible, then taught at Regent Seminary in British Columbia, and continued to write for many more years. I cannot tell you how many pastors have been touched by his life and ministry. He was equally clear about these three truths we've been talking about. And he was so free in so many ways. In Montana on Monday morning, at the age of 85, he became fully free. I'm so grateful he gave us fresh eyes to read the Bible.

And the Church has continued to find ways to communicate truth from the scriptures in a way that sets people free; and this includes Veggie Tales. This past Tuesday was a day off in the school district, so I brought our new kiddos to church with me for a little while and set up a work table in E-3 while they watched Jonah for the first time. I hadn't seen it in years, but our four kids grew up on them; and we used it all the time in our youth and children's ministries back in Idaho. I was working on this sermon and my ears perked up when Jonah was throwing a pity party outside of Nineveh because God was showing mercy to the repentant Ninevites. And the character who serves as a sort of Holy Spirit for Jonah said: "And they asked God for a second chance, and – by golly – He gave them one. Don't you see, God wants to give everyone a second chance. And so should we." Jonah throws a pity party because he isn't clear about grace. Let's be clear about our lostness, God's deep love, and His amazing grace. Any questions?