

Jeremiah 31, for Reformation Sunday

It's probably old news to you by now, if somewhat inaccurate. Martin Luther, compelled by God and conscience, nailed 95 claims or theses to the church door at Wittenberg in 1517, on what is now known as Reformation Day, protesting what he saw as the erroneous doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, he singlehandedly launched what is now called the Reformation and the *Protestant* movement.

So let's talk about what really happened. First of all, sorry, the nailing bit never happened. When he "posted" his fairly academic paper, it was more like slipping it into his boss's cubby. Next, Luther was not the first priest to publicly question the theology of the Church—a guy named Jan Hus had been burned at the stake more than 100 years prior for preaching many of the same tenets—and he did not act alone. Johannes Bugenhagen and Philip Melancthon are just two of his colleagues who did not become household names, maybe because they were harder to pronounce. So for better or for worse, Luther became the face, and eventually the name, of this instinct to question and reform the institutional church.

In the centuries since, the Lutherans and the Catholics have settled many of their differences, the most central of which has to do with grace. Luther and the reformers were troubled by the Church's emphasis on human responsibility to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2.12). Because, if human beings are broken beings, it stands to reason that we are not going to do a great job of saving ourselves. They believed our only chance is if we let God take the wheel.

But, for many people, including churchgoers and church leaders at the time, God seems like an entirely terrifying being, an angry judge insisting on settling accounts to the last penny and misdeed. You get why you might feel the need to get ahead of the curve, do more, pray more, confess more, give more, always wondering if it's enough to pay your bill. Luther's own story includes such anxiety about whether he was doing enough for his salvation that his own Father Confessor basically told him he needed to give it a rest. No wonder he was relieved beyond measure to discover the understanding that grace does not depend on human merit.

I want to point out that grace is threaded through scripture from the beginning. You can catch a glimpse of it in the first reading from Jeremiah,

when God promises to lead God's people back to their homeland out of exile: "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor together; a great company, they shall return here."

But grace is one of those churchy words that utterly bewildered me when I first came back to the church as an adult. It seemed to have something to do with forgiveness, but also more than that. Value-added forgiveness. So I want to let Lutheran pastor and rabble-rouser Nadia Bolz-Weber say a few words about it here:

"I like to think of Grace not as when God is a good enough guy to forgive me for my failings, but as when God is a source of wholeness, redemption and healing which *makes up* for my failings, which is *more powerful* than my failings."

Grace, to me," she continues, "is God's source code. It is the Spirit's renewable resource, and confession of sins, or completing a moral inventory and speaking it to another person, isn't the way we earn forgiveness – it's just the way to force our egos into a posture where we can receive forgiveness."

So apparently humans have to go through this humbling process, not because it's a demand of God's, but because it's a demand of our own thick skulls and stone-like hearts. In point of fact, this forgiveness is always already there and available to us. We're just too shut down and boarded up to know it.

Just like Adam and Eve hiding from God out of consciousness that they've done wrong, what British writer Francis Spufford calls the Human Propensity to Mess Things Up (he doesn't use the word "mess") means we would rather come up with every kind of denial than face the fact that we cannot manage our lives very well. Others deserve punishment. We deserve punishment. We project God's wrath everywhere like a theater screen.

For example, let's go back to the people of Judah in exile. Throughout the books of the major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, et cetera—the Babylonian exile is figured as the natural consequences of bad decision-

making. Mess around and find out, you might say. But even as Jeremiah paints God as fearsome and indeed punitive—just wait till your Father gets home!—Godself is lovingly awaiting a time of realization and reunion:

“With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back; I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path where they shall not stumble, for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” God is there by your side, has always been there, and your job is simply to wake up to that fact and trust it. And that is grace.

And so are all innumerable things we are freely given—life, love, and all of creation.

We’re not going to jimmy ourselves out of the Human Propensity to Mess Things Up, no matter how good we are or try to be. We’re always so shocked when someone we admire, say Mother Teresa, turns out to have a shadow side. Human propensity. Or institutions—even, or maybe especially, the institutional church. Human propensity. No one is immune. But there’s grace for that.

And what a relief to discover we can’t do it all ourselves. and therefore we don’t have to keep trying. It’s OK to accept help. And in the scheme of things, it might even be a plus that we have this human propensity, so that grace may abound. A line I love in the Great Vigil of Easter goes like this: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!”

Here’s Bolz-Weber again: “The sun rising in the East every day is grace. My virtue could not pull that ball of fire up over the horizon. It is grace that God would make her home in the womb of a peasant girl. That God would hang out, see what it’s like to have a body that aches and a mother that loves, and bread that nourishes, and sunrises that stun, and friends that console and friends that betray – and be under an empire that persecutes. God saw what all of that was like and said: now is the time of salvation and opened their arms wide on the cross and welcomed every horrible thing that our human propensity to f things up could do, and responded with only forgiveness.”

God’s *godly* propensity to re-form us and make us new is as inexorable as our human propensity. No, it’s actually more so. And having received

these things with gratitude, we try to practice spreading this love and grace around. Or, as 1 John reminds us, God is the source of all good things. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4.19). And is always waiting to welcome you home. Happy Reformation Day. Amen.