

I'm not sure if you've heard, but there is an election coming up in our country. Quite a lot could be said about this election, though not much that should be said from a pulpit or in a church, but one thing I will say I've found infuriating is when candidates and their supporters accuse their political opponents of the very same things they have done themselves, as if we don't live in an age where we can easily access every speech they've ever given and every vote they've ever cast, sometimes even video footage of them doing exactly what they claim to be outraged by. The uncharitable assumption is that they think we're too dumb to see the hypocrisy. If we give them the benefit of the doubt, it's at least a stunning lack of self-awareness. And that is a tale as old as time.

In John's gospel, Jesus offers a vision of new life to the people who had begun to follow 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.* Jesus is not talking about reading the red-letter words of the yet-to-be-written gospels; he's inviting them to continue living according to the example he has set by his teaching, preaching, healing, feeding, liberating ministry of merciful service. If they do that, they will truly be immersed in God's desires for the human community; that will fulfill what Jeremiah said, *when the Lord will put the law within them, and write it on their hearts; and the Lord will be their God, and they shall be God's people.* This sounds like great news: an invitation to participate in God's vision and freedom from the ways of the world that work against God's good intentions. But the the people don't take it that way.

*We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?* This is a stunning claim from the people of Israel, whose very identity as a nation stemmed from God rescuing them from captivity in Egypt. If that wasn't enough slavery for them, they had been conquered by every other world power that had come along since then: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, under whose occupation they were currently living. It would have been more accurate for them to say that they had been slaves to *everyone*, though Jesus isn't speaking about their geopolitical situation but their spiritual bondage. Jesus' followers were looking at their past and even at their present through a lens of insider privilege that distorted reality. As literal descendants of Abraham, they saw themselves as "God's people" whether they were living as God had intended and instructed or not. The lectionary doesn't include the whole conversation, but the more Jesus tries to get them to be honest with themselves, the angrier they get, until the chapter ends with Jesus running out of the Temple so they don't stone him.

We read this and the other appointed passages for Reformation Day as a reminder of Jesus' promise that it's not the labels we carry—be it descendant of Abraham, or Christian, or Lutheran, or whatever—

but it's the Son makes us free, and that we all have fallen short of the glory of God, but we are justified by grace through God's faithfulness. Considering the spiritual anguish that Luther suffered that led him to preach, teach, and write so passionately about God's mercy, we don't want to forget that foundation of grace on which our Lutheran heritage is built. Yet, if Jesus called his followers to look beyond their Abrahamic DNA, and if Luther called Christians to dig deeper than the traditions of the sixteenth century church, then we owe it to ourselves today to consider how justification by grace through faith is the beginning of the conversation, not the last word, of our call as disciples.

The medieval church taught people to dread death in anticipation of the torment they would need to suffer as punishment for sin. Luther sought to free us from that anxiety by teaching that we don't have to *do* anything to justify ourselves—that we can trust God's love and mercy. Then his successors turned that faith back into something we have to do—that we have to believe the right things or that our faith has to be “strong enough”—whatever that means—to save us. So now we have hundreds of denominations convinced of the perfect truth of their own beliefs, certain that all the others are going to find a “closed” sign when they get to the pearly gates. Yet getting into heaven is beside the point; Jesus was telling his disciples how to live *now*, for their own sake and the sake of others *in this life*. So, forgetting for a moment what the Reformation means for the afterlife, what does it mean for us now?

*Re-formation* is what happens when, instead of avoiding self-reflection, we embrace self-reflection and act on what we see, both individually and communally. We begin each liturgy with confession, not as a magic formula for absolution, and not to feel guilt for a moment or two so we're worthy of mercy, but because facing what we've done and left undone is how we begin to re-form our thoughts, words, and deeds so that tomorrow our lives reflect a little more clearly God's vision for our world. Reformation isn't just a historical event that we commemorate; it's the perspective through which we approach a life of faith. It's a call to look at ourselves with honesty, to look at Jesus' words and deeds with clarity, and to walk boldly in a new direction, trusting with humility God's gift of grace.

Friday I attended Temple Beth Israel's 150th anniversary service; it was also the day on their liturgical calendar that marks the end of the annual cycle of Torah readings. So we celebrated both their history as a faith community and their persistent return to the study of holy scripture—which seems pretty similar to what we're doing today. So I'll leave you with just a few lines from the prayers from that service: *Let us uphold the truth of ongoing revelation; Let us respect tradition and encourage creative faith; Our souls turn back to You for wisdom. Together, we offer this journey back to heaven and rejoice.*