

Reformation – 2020

Revelation 14:6-7

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

How many of y'all have faced adversity this year? Adversity; not inconvenience, not having to use milk in your coffee instead of ½ and ½, not having to postpone your vacation because flights were cancelled – real adversity. We all have heroes. We need heroes, archetype men who stand in the breach when danger calls. Rosie the Riveter kind of women who pull up their big girl pants and volunteer to serve. Adversity is a winnowing event; some stand tall while others melt like snowflakes. On 9-11, when good citizens were running out of burning buildings, heroes were running in. That's adversity. Having to walk to a desegregated school in 1957, a black young lass is harassed as she goes to her first day of high school in Little Rock, AR and she holds her head high. That's adversity.

How do you want to meet adversity? No one dreams of being a yellow-bellied, lily-livered coward. In fact, that was the worst insult that one could suffer back when I was a kid. No one wanted that label hung around their neck in my middle-class neighborhood. But I'm not sure that I've faced real adversity. I've seen tough times in the Navy. Being married... things are not always dreamy between a gentleman and his good lady wife – but it's not adversity. Anxiety, panic – when things aren't smooth some folks hightail it to the nearest safe space. It's true. Some folks can't function amid adversity. How about us? As Christians, I mean; what is our standard of behavior when difficulty arises? How do you want to meet adversity? To what do you aspire for yourself, in the midst of hardship?

I've got an idea. I say that we should aspire to be brave. Now I've said it – right out in the open in front of all you good people. I say that we should aspire to be brave. Not cocky, not arrogant, not full of ourselves – just brave, confident, assured of who we are and what we believe. Ready for the moment; ready to face adversity and meet whatever challenge comes. Reformation brings this virtue out into the sun. Jesus words are a tonic of courage. “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’” (John 8:31-32). The Lord Christ was incarnated for the express purpose of facing adversity. His life is in His Word. That irrepressible Word is living and active, conveying truth, instilling faith, giving rise to genuine hope. We are truly Christ's disciples. We abide in His Word. We cling to what the Master has done and what He has said. Jesus came not to address trifles. We are Christians not because we need a social circle or because we need a spiritual bow on our already well-ordered lives. Jesus came because sin and death brings an adversity that we cannot surmount. We are Christians because life is found nowhere else.

Some refuse to admit their situation. Some pursue false solutions or duct tape remedies. The Jews answered Jesus, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” (John 8:33). Sin is a universal malady/affliction. There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Sinful humanity is a race of slaves. Slaves to self, slaves to pride, slaves to whatever addicts us, slaves to vanity, slaves to deception, darkness, and depravity. Satan too has a kingdom.

Freedom. Do you know where it originates? Do you yearn for its sweetness, its open air? Do you long to be liberated from fear, from guilt?

“Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the Son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’” (John 8:34-36). Freedom captured Luther’s heart. He faced adversity. Martin Luther uncovered the power of grace, that God saves us by His work alone. Grace saturates the Scriptures. Grace saturates Christ’s church. Grace saturates this Divine Service. It is Christ who sets us free. The Son, the Incarnate Son of God came into the prison of this broken creation in order to be bound with our sin, our punishment and our death. Unlike any other, Jesus knew what adversity sin brings. But He had something in mind. To set us free.

In this country we have been the beneficiaries of a great society, freedom unlike any other in the civil domain. We celebrate it at regular junctures. July 4th is an annual reminder of what a good and precious gift is civil liberty. That freedom is only a shadow of what God offers us in the person of His Son. The astounding national freedom that spreads over this land is only a shadow of the treasure we have in Christ. Freedom for the soul. The luxurious freedom of forgiveness. The future but present freedom of heaven and life and divine love. You can explain the Reformation in lots of different ways, but bravery is certainly one of them. Facing adversity with a conviction that stems from an empty tomb makes a person formidable. Once a soul discovers the freedom that comes from the gospel, an authentic and Spirit-filled freedom that lifts us above this world’s adversities then that soul is loathe to surrender it to anyone or anything.

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. We embrace His Word not just to gain some academic knowledge. We learn and memorize and pour over the Scriptures not as an exercise that leads to worldly wisdom. We immerse ourselves in Christ’s Word in order to gain what is supremely true, what lifts the mind of man, what brings freedom of the highest order. We are heirs of the Reformation. Because we are in this world, we will face adversity. Grace is your armament. Grace is your shield. Grace is the divine resource that gives rise to bravery. You are loved of God. His Son determined to take your sin away in His crucified flesh. Love sacrificed Himself that you might be free. God breathed into you the breath of faith, calling you out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of life. He is your ever-present help and He is with you in every adversity. When you were dead in trespasses and sins, God made you alive in Christ, by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:5). That is the catalyst for heroism. Luther is a hero. He was fallen man, sinful like us, but one of the things Luther taught us was how to face adversity, he taught us how to be brave and stand tall when under attack.

Grace, freedom, and bravery – it is a cord of three strands. Luther was called before the princes of the church of Rome at the Diet of Worms. His life was very much at risk. He was called to recant his teachings. To be clear – Martin Luther was pinned to the wall by the very powerful and intimidated. They demanded that he take back the Word which had inspired the Reformation. They demanded that Luther say that we are not saved by Christ’s blood alone, not saved apart from our works, not saved by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. It was adversity on multiple levels – and Luther did not face it alone.

Here I stand, said the Reformer. Here I stand – on the work on Christ, on the righteousness of the Son of God and on the free gift of justification that comes through faith in His blood – Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God. Christ is our Mighty Fortress. Christ crucified is our helmet of salvation. Christ crucified and risen is our shield and our very present help in every time of difficulty. We stand in the same place as did Martin Luther. We are elated to stand in that place, on the Gospel as our eternal defense. That is the beautiful Christian life that calls to us, that ushers us into the broad domain of freedom. We stand there. Though we still have our fears, God strengthens us and blesses us and causes us to stand. His Word is unleashed here and we are His free people.