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*The Reformation Today:  
Whatever Became of "Faith Alone?"*

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*Jeremiah 31:31-35; Luke 18:34-43*

A man without sight, begging by the side of the road, calls out to Jesus for help as he passes by. The disciples try to quiet the man; *why would Jesus want to listen to someone like that*, they say to themselves? But Jesus stops and asks what he wants.

The man tells Jesus he wants to see again, and in an instant his eyes open. He sees – and he rejoices. Those who have witnessed the scene unfold rejoice with him, praising God for what has happened.

Then, above the jubilation, Jesus says to him, "Your faith has saved you."

That line is why Luke tells this story. That's why healing accounts like it are repeated throughout the gospels: *your faith has saved you*.

The ancient Greek here for "save" – *sesoken* – can have several meanings: *made you well, made you whole, delivered you, rescued you*. Your faith has saved you.

But it's the other part of this sentence that has true revolutionary impact: *Your faith* – not something or someone else, but *your* faith – has saved you. The man has what he needs within, and Jesus helps him see that, helps him uncover it. He needs no outside source of power. He does not need to seek permission. He's free to access the power of the God directly.

Forty years ago church member Tom Crosby commissioned Minnesota sculptor Paul Granlund to create a work of art as a gift not only to Westminster but also to the city. Crosby was inspired by the annual Christmas Eve editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* that speaks of freedom, published every year since 1949. It concludes with this line from Galatians:

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1)

Granlund created a piece that shows four human figures breaking out of bondage. The sculpture has just returned to the church in a more accessible location, and as I walk around it – you may notice this on the tour after church – I meet each figure anew. It's the man who could not see, being given sight again. It's the woman whose flow of blood for 12 years finally stops. It's the man with leprosy seeing his skin made new. They leap up and rejoice as they are set free.

The sculpture and, in fact, the design of the new wing all point to the *freedom* at the core of Christian faith, the open access each one of us has to the love of God.

*Your faith has saved you.* The Protestant Reformation begins with that assertion by Jesus.

In the midst of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Christianity characterized by dependence on the authority of the priestly hierarchy and control by Rome, to declare *we are saved by faith alone* turns everything upside down. It's the fulfillment of the prophetic word of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah:

"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

The man without sight, begging for his life by the side of the road, scorned by the disciples, those able-bodied, self-righteous, entitled, powerful disciples, has what he needs in his own heart. They are no better than he is.

"No longer shall they teach one another," God says through Jeremiah, "Or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for *they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD.*"  
(Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34)

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther and the other reformers reached back to that biblical tradition, back to the gospels, back to the prophets, and recovered the world-changing idea that all individuals have within themselves the power to save themselves, if only they turn and claim it, by faith.

Even further back in scripture we hear the same word in Deuteronomy:

"Surely, this commandment...is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven...Neither is it beyond the sea...No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." (Deuteronomy 30:12-14)

The genius of the Protestants was to link that liberating word to the life of the individual believer. The world, and certainly the Church, would be forever altered by that theological breakthrough. From the declaration that every individual is a self-determined human being whose life before God is not beholden to any other powers on this earth, it was only a matter of time before the structures of the Church – and, then, of society and economy, culture and politics – would begin to shift irreversibly.

Anyone who embraced the concept of *faith alone* would no longer need the power of external sources, the power of the Church or the authority of the priest to mediate access to God and to give them value as a human being.. It was there, in the heart, for the taking.

*Faith alone* is a declaration of independence.

Early Protestant insistence on individual freedom would have positive consequences that reverberated throughout Europe and around the world and that endure to this day. It gave rise to a profound re-thinking of civil power and authority and its relationship to the Church. It helped develop political democracy. It created a culture of individual rights and responsibilities. The core principle that each individual believer is free led to the emergence of acceptance and affirmations of others and their own God-given gifts..

But the transforming streams flowing out of the Protestant movement 500 years ago also have their shadow side. The Reformation emphasis on individual freedom, based on each person's autonomy and personal agency before God and the world, has been sacrificed too many times at the altar of narrow-mindedness and bigotry.

Over the years we Protestants have attempted to wed religious authority and political rule. It happened in John Calvin's 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva. It happened in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It happened in 19<sup>th</sup> century America with Christian, even Presbyterian, support of slavery, wedding in a paradoxical way their focus on individual freedom before God and a desire for power that limited that very freedom. It happened in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa.

It was never successful, or tolerant, or just. It was never theologically sustainable for those of us in the reformed tradition who stand on the free right of the individual to be whoever God made that individual. Coupling that emphasis with an exclusive interpretation of political power would not and does not work.

*Whatever happened to "faith alone?"*

*We are Protestants. Presbyterians.* We stand in a tradition that – at its best – refuses to lock-down a formula for salvation. We believe all of us already have the light of God's love of within us. It does not need to be given to us by some outside authority. We are heirs to a theological and political insistence on individual freedom, with rights and responsibilities. We inherited a faith that not only tolerates but accepts and celebrates diversity, precisely because it affirms individuals in all their God-given, beautiful variety.

The great theological struggle for Christians and other people of faith in the coming century, the coming years, the coming days, will be to find our place in a religiously diverse world, without being judgmental or dismissive, or angry about, or violent toward, those of other traditions. Protestants should be prepared to take the lead, especially we who are Presbyterians. "God alone is Lord of the conscience," is a basic principle of reformed theology that not only asserts *our* right to individual freedom, but also affirms *the same right for others*.

Sixty years ago Westminster members helped fund the Chapel at Abbott Hospital, back when the hospital was owned by the church, making it, in effect, a Christian hospital. So we built a chapel. Today the hospital is rebuilding the Chapel, only this time it will not have any religious symbols in it, and it will be called the Center for Reflection and Renewal. It will honor the diverse religious traditions of those who will use the space. And, again, it is being built with support from Westminster members who embrace the historic Protestant tenet of tolerating and accepting and rejoicing in the diversity that God has given to the human family.

*Open Doors Open Futures* will challenge us in similar ways. Our on-site mission partner, St. David's, will be working every day with Somali-American Muslim families in our building. We will provide a space for prayer in our church building for Muslim staff members, because *we are Protestants*.

That distinct approach to tolerance and acceptance of diversity arises from the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Protestant discovery of the principle of *faith alone*. Individual believers work out through their own conscience, in their own hearts, their relationship to the Almighty, however they name the Holy One.

Jesus said to those he healed, "Your faith has saved you." He was telling them they need look no further than their own hearts, where the Word of God has already been placed, no further than that, to be set free to live into the fullness of their humanity.

The challenge for each of us is to be attentive to the Word that dwells within us. It's not easy in our busy, noisy world full of distractions to center on the life of God within us. It is not easy and to develop an inner life and find there the freedom that is ours through faith.

Theologian Cindy Rigby describes a recent concert of her 13-year old son's middle school orchestra. At the conclusion, the conductor introduced one more piece by saying the orchestra was going to play in a state competition in which they would be provided the scores for a piece of music they had never played and given eight minutes to prepare to sight read it. She wanted the orchestra to try it while the audience watched.

After the mystery scores were passed out to the middle schoolers, Ms. Crowley, the conductor, said to the students, "'Open your music and let's play.' The students opened their music," Rigby says, "But made no move to put instruments to lips or produce any sounds...Ms. Crowley nonetheless began to conduct, arms raised and moving, humming and gesturing, drawing the students into the piece, measure by measure."

"The students went right along with her," Rigby says.

"With instruments still in resting position, their eyes darted back and forth from score to teacher...every student still riveted, though now not as much to Ms. Crowley. Somehow, you could tell, they had entered the music itself...Ms. Crowley had ushered her students into a piece they had never seen, had never played..."

Rigby continues. "When the eight-minute timer sounded, Ms. Crowley stopped...and invited her company to make the beautiful music that first had claimed them and now became their own. And those 13-year-old kids played out loud, for the very first time, the music they already knew."

*It was in their heart.* It was in their heart, and Ms. Crowley helped them find it.

The church does something like that when it worships, when it prays and sings, when it shares God's love: it helps people discover what they already have. That's what happened on the road to Jericho that day when Jesus stopped to listen to the man calling to him. He helped him find the tune in his heart – and he leapt up, rejoicing with those around him.

“We are already members of God's household,” Rigby says, “Musicians who have ways of hearing the music, even when it is not playing.” (*Insight*, Austin Seminary, Spring 2017; pp. 38-40)

To have faith, and to be saved by it, means hearing the music of God's love in our hearts.

It means playing the tune that has already been placed into the deepest reaches of our very being, and finding in that music the freedom God longs for each of us to have, the freedom to be fully who we are.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer ~10:30 am Worship**

Matthew Johnson

God of all creation, you faithfully tend to this garden you've given us. You set the sun, and the moon, and the stars in the vastness of space, giving us light both by day and night, illuminating the sky with the marvelous works of your creative energy.

You give order to our world, setting one season after another, establishing the pattern of life, death, and new birth, calling forth all things in their season. Fill the harvest season with life-giving abundance, as the earth gives its yield freely before a season of rest.

You bless this world with the beauty of diversity. Draw all people together and teach us to recognize and celebrate the unique gifts you have given us in one another. Embolden us to teach the world your love for all people, and give us courage to break down the destructive barriers of racism, and bigotry, and narrowmindedness that too easily divide us.

God of abundant life, through the biblical story and the life of your Son, Jesus, you reveal your vision of shalom for all people. Draw near to all who are separated from that shalom by fear and violence, especially those affected by terrorism in London and elsewhere. Comfort them with the hope nurtured by life in your presence.

You brought your people out of Egypt, faithfully loving them, leading them, forgiving them, and renewing them. Grant wisdom, a yearning for justice, and the patience and persistence to pursue it to all who lead in our city, our state, our nation, and throughout the world. Soften hard hearts, filling them with the passion to pursue your kingdom at all times and in all places.

This world which you so faithfully tend is hurting. Break open our arrogance and ignorance which damage your creation. Remind us of our interconnectedness with everything from the tiniest bacteria at work in our bellies to the expansiveness of the atmosphere which fills us with breath. Teach us to care for all that you have made.

God of wind and wave, we know that people are hurting as they recover from the devastation of hurricanes in Florida, Texas, Cuba, Mexico, and throughout the Caribbean. Others' lives are disrupted by fires and earthquake. Bring peace, healing, and the aid that you desire as our siblings put their tattered lives and livelihoods back together.

God who was present with the blind man when he received sight through the power of faith, draw us into faithful relationship with all who ail in body, mind, or spirit that they may be surrounded with the comfort, healing, and peace that you alone can give.

Ever faithful God, sustain us with the gift of faith, that we might live lives of prayer and praise, always striving to share your endless love with this world so much in need. Through Jesus Christ and in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we pray.

Hear us now, as we join voices, praying together the words our Lord Jesus taught us...