

I will never forget my first piano recital performance in college. I loved to perform and really make good music, but I did NOT like performing from memory. Performing from memory has always been a terrifying experience for me. Anxiety would rule my entire being as I would try to perfectly remember every note on the page and all the precise fingering while implementing every little nuance to create something that sounded like real music and not just a bunch of notes. You see, I was a perfectionist, very focused in on myself. Anyway, there I was on stage in the performance hall playing from memory, performing the first movement of a Mozart sonata. I will never forget the way my right foot shook as I tried to properly use the pedal the way it should be used for playing Mozart. My foot shook terribly because fear controlled my performance. I feared I would have a memory slip, I was fearful of what everyone was thinking, I feared making a mistake and I feared I would fail! Fear permeated my performance and fear held me in bondage. And, the truth is, I **did** have a memory slip and had to fake my way through it until I got back into a place where I remembered the notes. While only the instructors knew what happened, fear and the desire to be perfect held me captive, preventing me from making the music I so longed to create.

There is a name for this kind of fear that is so rooted in self achievement, so focused in on self, so focused on how one is looked upon by others, a fear that permeates everything one does including the desire to be perfect. It is called sin.

Martin Luther understood sin. He was **plagued** by his own sin before he discovered God's unmerited grace. After that great discovery, he talked about sin in a different way. He talked about it in a way that really makes sense. You see, sin is much bigger than simple immorality or immoral behavior. Sin is really the way in which we as people focus in upon ourselves. Sin is when our focus is on the "I" or the **ego**. It is when the **self** becomes all important without a thought for God or neighbor. Sin is when we put ourselves in the place of God. And, there are many symptoms of sin. Symptoms include immoral behavior, alcoholism and various forms of addiction, the multiple ways in which our behavior and actions intentionally hurt and attack others, the hateful things we say to others and about others as words become weapons, the way we consider ourselves superior to others. The list goes on and on. And, with sin there is often this sense within us of not measuring up. So, we need the gift of the Law to reveal to us our sinful nature. I like what Nadia Bolz Webber says about sin and the Law. She writes:

Sin is the fact that my ideals and values are never enough to make me always do what I *should*, feel what I *should*, think what I *should*. And anything that **reveals** those “shoulds” to me is what we call The Law, the Law being the very thing Paul in his letter to the Romans said reveals sin. The “shoulds” in our lives are the things that make us see how far off the mark we are. No matter what we think the “shoulds” are – personal morality and family values and niceness and conservative political convictions **or** inclusivity and recycling and eating local and progressive political convictions.....there is always **always**, no matter how hard we try, a gap between our ideal self and our actual self. (NBW 2012 sermon, *Why the Gospel is More Wizard of Oz-y Than the Law*, on Patheos)

Martin Luther had experienced the weight of the Law and knew what it was like for the Law to convict him. Luther was agonizingly aware of the gap in his own life between his ideal self and his actual self. He was tormented and tortured by his own sin as he found himself unable to measure up to the way he thought he “**should**” live. Then he discovered the passage we just heard from the book of Romans and it not only changed his life, it changed the world. He discovered salvation is all about God’s grace and it has absolutely **nothing** to do with works. There is absolutely **nothing** anyone can do to earn it. In this passage he discovered the **truth** about **grace** and that truth **liberated** him from the bondage he had been in. Luther discovered that this truth about God, as Jesus tells us in today’s gospel, is what really makes you **free**.

You see, when we try to fulfill all the “shoulds” in life, thinking **that** is what determines our worth and value, we are in bondage. The Gospel good news is very different. Again, listen to what ELCA pastor, Nadia Bolz Webber says about this good news. She writes:

[The Gospel is] more Wizard of Oz than [the Law and the “shoulds.”] The Gospel is a *because because because because* proposition. *Because* God is our creator and *because* we rebel against the idea of being created beings and insist on trying to be God for ourselves and *because* God will not play by our rules and *because* in the fullness of time when God had had quite enough of all of that God became human in Jesus Christ to show us who God really is and *because* when God came to God’s own and we received him not, and *because* God would not be deterred God went so far as to hang from a cross we built and did not even lift a finger to condemn but said forgive them for they know not what they are doing and *because* Jesus Christ defeated even death and the grave and rose on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day and *because* we all sin and fall short and are forever turned in on ourselves and forget that we belong to God and that none of our success guarantees this and none of our failures exclude this and *because* God loves God’s creation God refuses for our sin and brokenness and inability to always do the right things to be the last word *because* God came to save and not to judge and **therefore.....therefore** you are saved by grace as a gift and not by the works of the law and this truth will set you free like no self-help plan or healthy living or social justice work “should” [or] can ever do.

People, to enter fully into the glorious liberty of the people of God, we really need to spend more time understanding this gift of grace and thinking about the freedom we have been given in Christ. The greater church needs to spend more time thinking about the gift of freedom we have been given. The church, by and large, for far too long has had a poor record of

encouraging freedom. The church has focused on “do’s” and “don’ts”. The church has spent so much time inculcating in us the fear of making mistakes that the church, itself, has made us like ill-taught piano students; we play our songs, but we never really hear them, because our main concern is **not** to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in ditch. “Even the body of the church has been so afraid we will lose sight of the laws of our nature, that the Church often cares more about how we look than about who we are; made us act more like the subjects of a police state than fellow citizens of the saints.” [Robert Capon in *Between Noon and Three*. p. 148] For far too long, the church has focused on “do’s and don’ts” in regard to people’s behavior and not focused on truly understanding the gift of grace we have been given. You see, when we truly begin to understand grace, we no longer have to justify who we are and what we do, we can then simply respond by living into the fullness of the freedom of God.

So today, as we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, we give thanks for the Law **and** for the **Gospel**. You see, it is the Law that puts us in the place where we can fully hear the gospel. And, quite honestly, when truth is spoken without apology or hesitation, it can often be hard to hear and there is a way in which it will crush us. **But**, it crushes us so that we can be put back together. And, it is that Gospel word of grace

that truly puts us back together and re-forms us. This re-forming happened to me when I realized I did not have to be perfect and it was even **ok** if I failed. God loves me and accepts me **as I am, flaws, failures and all!** This is the re-formation that is always happening in our lives. This re-formation is how we are called to live and this re-formation is also God's call to the church. Live into to the freedom of God's grace and be re-formed into the people God calls you to be.