

## OFFERINGS

Jer.31:31-34; Rom. 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

The film *Luther*, which has received excellent reviews from several confirmation classes, which are not the easiest of audiences, begins with a young and panic-stricken Martin Luther running, gibbering across an open field in a lightening storm, terrified that God is going to strike him down for his sinfulness. The young Luther has a miserably guilty conscience, and for no real reason, except perhaps that he has an autocratic father whom he has confused with God and because he is a product of the medieval Christian Church which commonly taught its members that the right relation to God was that of fear and self-abnegation. Such was the Christianity of Luther until experience and study of the scriptures opened his eyes. Luther writes:

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage [God]. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against [God]....

“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by... faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us

through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning...”

The passage that Luther is referring to as bringing about this change in him is the one that is our Epistle Lesson for today. It is a passage that is not as clear as it needs to be and not too much clearer in Luther’s reference to it in his description of the change of heart and mind that came as a result of his reading of the passage. Permit me to see if I can put the insight of St. Paul in a simple and straightforward way.

1. We are all of us the creatures of God’s grace, albeit imperfect creatures.

Despite our imperfections, God loves us with an inexhaustible love. We do not earn this love by our good deeds. Rather, it is bestowed upon us by the God who is full of grace, and hence it is bestowed upon us without condition or merit of our own.

2. This is the Christian understanding of God, and to understand God in this way is our faith. It is this faith that is revealed in Christ Jesus who was the grace of God in the flesh, gracious to the end, even to his tormentors and executioners. The Christian faith believes that the grace of God is revealed in the person of Jesus, and to have faith that Christ is savior is to have faith that God’s way with the world is grace.

3. The truth that sets us free comes of understanding that our relation to God is one of love and not obligation. This is the fundamental teaching of the Christian gospel and the fundamental insight in Luther’s reformation of the church. Let guilt and fear go. This is not God’s way with us. God’s way with us is grace, free acceptance of us. This is the Christian faith.

I hope you will agree that this is the faith that is taught at Emanuel, taught consistently in worship, and in Christian education in the parish, and in our ministry and

the way that we use our resources. As a congregation, we strive to open our arms and unclench our fists, to be open-hearted and open-handed. We greet, we welcome, we say, “Yes.” We deplore anything that diminishes or exploits the good creatures of God’s grace, animal, vegetable, or mineral. We seek to understand rather than to judge. The congregation’s name is Emanuel, which means “God with us.” The God whom we believe is with us is the God of grace, and it is our faith in this God that we practice as individuals and as a community. I hope that is your experience of Emanuel.

We are all being asked today to make a pledge of support to the life and work of this church. There is no punishment for not making such a pledge. Nor, however, is there a reward for making a pledge. If a pledge is made, it is a free act of grace, inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, grace for grace. Unlike practically everything else in our society, a pledge to this church is not a calculated gesture for the purpose of getting something in return, or at least it shouldn’t be.

For example, one gets paid for going to work. A job may have its satisfactions and be something that one enjoys for these satisfactions, but few people could afford to keep working in a job if there was no paycheck, regardless of those satisfactions—one goes to work, one gets paid, one goes to work, one gets paid, and so on. Similarly, there may be students who love school and would go even if the state did not demand they go. But if one doesn’t want to go, one cannot just sleep in or blow off classes without there being consequences. On the other hand, if one does well in his/her studies, there will be rewards for this or so it is hoped. If one belongs to a sports team or to a band for the pleasure of playing the game or the music, one must attend practices or face being cut from the organization.

In all these examples, there are rewards and punishments that serve as incentives for one's participation. But not so in the case of the church, or at least not so in the case of a church that is rooted in the grace of God. This is not to say that there are no church members who participate because they fear they will be punished for not fulfilling an obligation or who think that they will be rewarded somehow for their participation. But they have missed the point. The Christian church is or should be an exercise in grace, the response of love to love. Moreover, a church founded in the grace of God will extend itself to members and non-members whether they support the church or not, because the church, when it is the church of Christ, does not calculate its ministry according to the faithfulness or pedigree of those who need its services. None of this is to say that churches or that our church in particular live perfectly the grace of God in all we say and do. The church is a human institution that is quite capable of forgetting its calling and its purpose. But a church that is not striving to be gracious in its life and ministry is not in any recognizable sense Christian, and members who approach the church looking to be paid in some way for their membership (and this of course includes the clergy who are literally paid by the church) greatly misunderstand what the church is and is for.

The act of pledging to the work of the church is essentially a spiritual exercise. Whatever pledging may do materially to support and facilitate the work of the church, pledging is for us who are making the pledges an expression of grace, giving of ourselves when we do not have to do so, giving without expecting repayment for the gift. Pledging is a token of our generosity in response to the generosity of God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is literally an offering, not a collection taken but an offering freely given. Nor would it be wrong to say that the church, when it is faithful in its

efforts and expressions, is itself an offering, and thereby a reflection of and witness to the truth which sets us free. If we judge the church to be faithful in its offering, it is difficult to see why we who are members wouldn't make the affirmation that a pledge represents as one aspect of a faith active in love. Amen.

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church