

Sunday, August 14, 2022

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Our reading from Hebrews today contains a list of those who persevered “by faith.” The list is made up of followers, who are like us. That is followers who are not perfect. This list includes individuals who lost their grip as often as they remained faithful, or who survived long enough to be useful thanks to the faithfulness of others.

Therefore, the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us is not as much heroes and role models as a whole host of those to whom God remained faithful and whose labors proved a blessing because God would not give up on them or the world full of sinners for whom Christ went before us, to the cross, and into God’s presence.

Yet this great cloud of witnesses surely was accountable through each and every day of their lives to the Lord their God.

In a rather challenging example of “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” many Lutherans know just enough about salvation by grace through faith to come to the conclusion that we need not really think about accountability anymore.

“Forgiveness of sins” sounds like a free pass absolving us of all guilt, and “freed from sin and death” sounds like we don’t need to worry about hell. It’s easy to assume that this is the meaning of grace, and that accountability is its opposite, belonging with judgment and condemnation at the other end of the theological spectrum. The warnings we find in Jeremiah have been replaced by the promise of the Good Shepherd and walking with God is now all peaceful green pastures.

That is until Jesus complicates things by getting all “Old Testament prophet” on us. If we find his words confusing, and even distressing, it’s probably because we have forgotten that accountability isn’t the opposite of grace; rather, it is one of its facets.

There is a real and true dividing line between that which kills and that which brings life. And certainly, sometimes that line is blurry, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. All too often it’s pretty clear and we still ignore it. We know that God calls us into life. Part of the graciousness of God is that God won’t tolerate us claiming sin and death and fooling ourselves into thinking it’s going to be okay. That which kills us must be named and overcome. The wheat must be sorted, the metal refined, the line drawn.

So then, we are left with this tightrope wherein God tries to help us understand that God’s love is free and ridiculously abundant, and at the same time God absolutely will not tolerate the sin that is still killing us. And this is most assuredly the sign of God’s love for us because God desires that we live well and fully and delightedly in God, which we can’t do when we’re holding onto death.

Accountability to the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, life and death – accountability to God and to one another in the body of Christ – isn't a means to inflict shame. It's a tool, a gift, to help us cling more closely to God and less closely to death. It's a relationship defined by honesty, love, courage, and hope, in the promise that life really can come out of death, as long as we stop trying to deny the truth of death.

This truth-telling, this clarifying of what is right and what is wrong, what is life-giving and what is death-dealing, has always been resisted by the powers that be. And that is exactly why God has always needed prophets, and why that job has always been so hard.

Facing hard truths about sin, whether personal or societal, doesn't feel great and doesn't increase our popularity. But anyone who has accepted accountability in a different situation and grown from it has an understanding of the grace that comes when you clarify what is right and wrong.

Denominational expressions of the church often set up a variety of structures for accountability, such as requirements for receiving communion and expressions for membership. Over time, as the church has tried to become more welcoming and inclusive, these structures of accountability have been reassessed and redefined.

For many of us who are of a certain age, as youth we could not commune until we were confirmed. Many of us saw this as the carrot and stick method. And the same held true with the notion that you were not a member of the church until you finished confirmation. Carrot and stick, again.

We've moved from there to where one who is baptized is a member of the church. At confirmation one becomes a voting member. The age of receiving communion varies from the smallest of children to older children before confirmation age.

And I'm certain that we could debate the benefits and drawbacks of these and other decisions, other changes, that we've seen over our years as members of a congregation.

Many churches of multiple denominations over the past 20 or more years have added a contemporary service and/or a blended service to the weekly worship offerings. Video screens, bands, praise songs, etc. "Worship Wars" resulted in many congregations over the very thought of contemporary worship. After all, we are Lutherans so what could possibly be wrong with the way we've worshipping for centuries?

Within the church, I believe, there is always room for change, but we must always ask ourselves – "but, to what end?"

In the midst of change or not, we are always accountable to God. We cannot ever pervert God's word to meet our needs. We must know, understand and appreciate God and God's word and what his word means in our lives. This is especially so when we strive to be faithful to our ever-faithful God.

We are also constantly being reminded that the church continues to be counter cultural. The church is the antithesis of much of what is going on around us. Fewer people are identifying as Christians or with any religion. Fewer people acknowledge the Bible as God's Holy Word.

More and more congregations are closing and since COVID many are struggling to exist and are fearful of the near future.

And through it all we are called to be accountable to God. It's a difficult road to travel and it is surely plagued with numerous potholes and detours that we can never anticipate.

Where might the fact that we are counter cultural and accountable to God lead us – each one of us and the church which is an integral part of our life?

There are of course numerous scenarios floating around. Personally, two float to the top for me.

Number one. I can remember sitting in a seminary class and Rev. Dr. Robert Jenson was talking and pontificating and this particular class he stated that to his way of thinking it was entirely possible that the church as we know and love it just might once again become an underground movement. Now that's something to think about, isn't it? We wondered, are his words those of a modern-day prophet?

Number two. I hold out for a New Reformation and a new awakening that leads more and more people to understand and appreciate that we are creatures with God are indeed accountable to the One who created us out of pure, unadulterated love, who offers us salvation through Jesus Christ,

I believe we must constantly pray for a New Reformation realizing that without such a resurgence of faith in Christ, those who follow us, by a few generations, may be part of the underground church.

As Lutherans, we are familiar with the nature of this faith journey. Jesus calls us to both the green pastures and the way of the cross. To be included may mean to be rejected. To love like Jesus may mean being hated like Jesus. To live may mean to die. To find grace may mean to accept accountability. But at the end of it all, we find ourselves held by the God of always-new beginnings.

Thanks be to God. Amen