

Reformation Sunday Sermon
Zoar Lutheran Church
October 26, 2025
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A couple of summers ago, I had a brief stint as a hospital chaplain as part of my seminary degree. One day, I walked into the room of a gentleman who was admitted for heart trouble. He welcomed me kindly and enthusiastically into his room. He invited me to pull up a chair and we started to get to know one another, smiling and talking about some mystic experiences he had had. And then, in the same jovial tone, he started telling me about his faith. He described theology rooted in white supremacy, believing that the climate crisis was a great thing because it was a sign of Jesus' Second Coming that would destroy America so it could be rebuilt as a fully Christian nation. He went on to speak about Christ's love being reserved for a select few and had all kinds of opinions about justice issues that I found entirely repulsive. But my job in that moment was not to defend the oppressed – this man was vulnerable in the hospital and my job was to care for his spiritual needs. So, I turned off my ears and tried very hard to instead listen to the undercurrent of spiritual pain in the moment. I'm not sure that I succeeded but the encounter remained friendly and he invited me to come back and see him again.

I've thought about that visit a lot over the years. More than anything, I want to know why did he think I would agree with him? He obviously did. This question has haunted me. How did I present myself so that he assumed I shared his beliefs about God? Was it my whiteness? My age? My religiosity? I didn't wear a collar for that job, so I didn't present as female clergy. If I'd worn a clergy collar, would he have acted differently? Did my demeanor somehow give him permission to spout vitriol under the guise of faith? I really don't know but I've thought about it a lot. Because I don't like that I reflected for him something so very contrary to what I believe about God and the hope of Christ.

This story came to mind when I read today's gospel because I wonder if perhaps I showed up as "nice", which read "permissive". And on this Reformation Sunday, I think we as Lutherans would be wise to deeply consider how we show up in this time. I always think it's funny that Lutherans, the denomination named after a cranky, outspoken, and wildly compassionate leader, are often so hesitant to rock the boat. Lutherans are "nice". They follow the rules. They sing every verse of every song, even the really long ones. But maybe we should

consider Jesus's instruction that we make some noise and beat our breasts a little, humbling ourselves to speak truth to our shortcomings. And not just through artfully crafted social statements but through raw, actual emotion – you know, that thing that most of us good Lutherans try so hard to keep private. Jesus tells us that the tax collector, whose faith is so strong it can't be contained, is justified through his faith, but the Pharisee who is doing all the proper, “nice” things, not so much. Sound familiar, fellow Lutherans? Justification through faith alone – meaning that we can't earn our way into righteousness – is a basic, beautiful tenet of Lutheran theology. In 1535, Martin Luther wrote, “The true Gospel has it that we are justified by faith alone, without the deeds of the Law. Martin was also known to have said, “Every week I preach justification by faith to my people, because every week they forget it.”

But this little parable is so much more than fodder for the theology of faith by justification alone. It is also an important reminder that comparison is a big spiritual problem. Let's remember that the Pharisee in this story is, under ancient Jewish custom, righteous in his tithing and fasting. That's not a bad thing. But it's in the comparison that Jesus takes issue. The Pharisee exposes his spiritual brokenness when he says, “Thank God I'm not like that guy”. Once the Pharisee compares himself to “thieves, rogues, adulterers, or the tax collector”, he becomes the loser in the parable.

You can see how the Pharisee reduces the “others” to only their sins. “Thieves, rogues, adulterers”. Their humanity and wholeness are not part of their identity to the Pharisee. How many times do we either unintentionally or otherwise do the same? How different would our public discourse be if we first recognized that people are people. Like if we replaced the many words we have to succinctly describe groups of people with phrases that uphold their humanity first. “People who check the box for people who align with Democrat or Republican values” instead of using party names? “People who have been convicted of a crime” instead of criminals? “People serving in the military” instead of troops? “People killed in war” instead of casualties? “People who follow in the footsteps of Jesus” instead of the oh-so-fraught word Christians? There are so many names we give to groups of people that seem to gloss over the primacy of them as people, people who – Psalm 139 reminds us – are “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God (Psalm 139:14).

In the Thursday morning Bible study, we've been exploring *The Great Search* by John Philip Newell, a book that profiles a handful of spiritual seekers throughout

history. One of my favorite chapters thus far is about Rumi, a 13th-century Muslim poet. Rumi, if you don't know of him, says it like it is. He is playful and wise and a big fan of Jesus, not as a Messiah but as a divinely-inspired teacher. And one of Rumi's poems highlighted by John Phillip Newell in the book so eloquently speaks to the point about names and identity in Jesus's story from today.

Rumi writes:

"The differences are just illusion and vanity.
Sunlight looks different on this wall
Than it does on that wall
And a whole lot different
On this wall over here
But it is still sunlight.
.... Just as one man can be a father to you
Brother to another and uncle to yet another,
What you are searching for has many names
But one existence.
Stop looking for one of the names
Move beyond attachment to names.
Every war and conflict between human beings
Has happened because of some disagreement about the names.
It's such unnecessary foolishness
Because just beyond the arguing,
Where we are all one people,
There is a long table of companionship
Beautifully set
And just waiting for us to sit down [together]."¹

"There is a long table of companionship beautifully set and just waiting for us to sit down [together]." I love this. The etymology of the word companion comes from the Latin "together with bread". It's who we share a meal, who we share life, with. As people, we are all human companions. All of us. Names don't change that.

¹ Newell, John Philip. *The Great Search: Turning to Earth and Soul in the Quest for Healing and Home*. New York, NY: Collins, 2024. 116

I admit that in the chaplaincy encounter with the patient that I talked about earlier, I left the room and thought, “Whoa. Thank God I’m not *that* guy”. To be brutally honest, I think I also thought, “Thank God I’m not *married* to that guy”. And, like the Pharisee in the parable, that’s when I veered away from God in the encounter. In my mind, I labeled him as a white christian nationalist and forgot that he was my companion, a broken person like myself seeking comfort in my faith. I chose to shut off my hearing because it was just too painful, too scary, too offensive. I stopped being curious. This doesn’t mean that we need to condone theology that oppresses people and planet under the banner of righteousness – in fact, I think that this parable teaches us to get a little noisier and be a little more raw in our faith expressions– but we do need to stay curious about the people who seem to act in contradiction with our interpretations of the gospel. Not for the purposes of seeking validation that our interpretations are better than theirs and not in order to build a stronger case against them and not even to try to convert them. But just because we are all people, fearfully and wonderfully created by God, in God’s own image.

Friends, I hope that we have the humility to stand together with this basic tenet at the forefront of our lives this week. Let us be a people who boldly sing every verse to every song not because we’re supposed to but because we’re a loud, resilient bunch of Lutherans who find hope through humility, justification through connectedness, and righteousness through repentance. Let us remember that we follow a movement started by a man who was considered many things but “nice” wasn’t one of them. Let us use people-first language and notice how our companions are “othered” through language that strips away their humanity. Let us be a counter-cultural people who simply refuse to be sucked into hierarchies of comparison. Let us be a people who focus our hearts on God, beat our chests, and beg for mercy humbly, loudly, visibly, and publicly, knowing that righteousness is messy and a gift for all.

Let God’s people say Amen!