

“Seeing Again for the First Time”

Reformation Sunday

October 30, 2011

Some years ago I buried a young man who died of AIDS. At his funeral I read a scripture verse from the Book of Romans. This was a verse that I had read 100 times or more. This time, because of this young man’s death and what had caused it, I read this verse differently. The verse hadn’t changed, my context had. Therefore, now when I read the verse “It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?” I read it through the context of his funeral and all I have experienced. It is as if it is new. It felt, and still feel, as if I was seeing it again for the first time.

The context of our lives makes a big difference in how we understand life. So much of who we are has been interpreted through this context. There is no denying it. Our self-esteem, our confidence, our sense of value has been in some degree shaped by our context. When the context changes we can be caught off guard. If we are lucky, we begin to see ourselves again for the first time. I interpret this as God’s activity and a blessing from God.

I remember once, when in a text study with other pastors, one of the pastors shared an insight that I have never forgotten. This insight revolved around the word “new” found in our first lesson.

It seems that one of his friends was a rabbi, and in a conversation he once had with him, the rabbi shared his frustration regarding the way we Christians interpret this lesson. It was the opinion of the rabbi that we Christians interpret the word “new” as different, better, or complete. The new covenant then is seen as a better one, one that is more complete, different than before. Whereas, in the Jewish tradition nothing could be further from the truth.

New doesn’t mean different, it means new as with regard to context. That is to say, the story was the same, the covenant was the same, God was the same – but the context had changed. Once independent, Israel is now enslaved; once obedient, now disobedient; once confident now uncertain. Because Israel’s context had changed, so too would their understanding of the covenant (not unlike my experience with the young man who died of AIDS). It would seem different and feel different. And it would! It was different. It was different because Israel’s life and context was different. They would be seeing it again for the first time.

God works in our life in strange ways. I used to see Reformation as something that focused on what we do in response to God. It isn’t about what we do, did do, or will do. Instead, I now see it as what God has done, is doing, and will do. We see the old stories, the familiar verses, and the remembered events in a new light. It is as if we are seeing them again for the first time.

Isn’t this what happened to Martin Luther? He saw some familiar passages as new. The context of his life had changed. What once was seen as ordinary became the power of God. Luther’s context, the selling of forgiveness, paved the way to see and believe in a Bible passage differently that he must have read 100 times: “We hold that a person is justified by grace apart from works of the flesh.” These words changed his life and the life of the church. There was no turning back. The reformation had begun.

What is the context of your life? Do you see God affecting a change? Has the context changed enough that old familiar verses look and sound new?

Change isn't easy. It requires struggle, desire, and opportunity. God does all three in our lives. Through the ever-changing context of life God is changing our view. Through the ever-changing context of our life God is altering our thoughts. And through the ever-changing context of our life God is making us look at life again for the first time.

Reformation is about change. Not the kind of change we do for ourselves, but the kind of change God creates in our lives. It is the kind of change that helps us to see again for the first time.

AMEN