

Who is justified? (Luke 18:9-14)

This Reformation Day, I'm preaching the Gospel text from the lectionary.

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Some of us will be marking this Sunday as Reformation Sunday—a Lutheran detour from the Revised Common Lectionary. For more than 30 years, I have felt obligated to abandon the steady sermonic march of the appointed lectionary text in favor of the Reformation Day Gospel: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-36).

Perhaps it is because familiarity breeds complacency, but the thought of preaching on John 8 this year makes me yawn. After struggling to keep up with Luke’s Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, the Reformation Day texts feel like I am being dropped out of warp speed. I resent setting the “reroute” on my preaching GPS for this one-week side trip into John’s Gospel.

But if Jesus is correct and the truth makes us free, I boldly claim a freeing truth on the last Sunday of October. There is no more “reforming” Gospel message than this: “I tell you, the tax collector went down to his home justified, rather than the Pharisee.”

This parable follows on the bruised heels of the unjust justice and the pugilistic widow (Luke 19:1-8). And as in that text, neither character in Sunday’s parable is portrayed in a flattering light.

Without question, the Pharisee speaks truth. He is not at all like others at temple whose lives are an embarrassment to themselves and an affront to God. He keeps the law more faithfully than any of them—fasting, tithing, praying. He is, to quote Paul, a Pharisee among Pharisees. Though his self-righteousness is almost laughable, there is nothing inaccurate in his self-assessment or his worldview.

But the tax collector also speaks truth. I doubt he dreamt as a child of extorting people for a living, but collecting taxes is the way he supports himself and his family. He knows it is messy business. He knows he is regarded with contempt. So, even though he cannot change careers, he can acknowledge the sorry state of his life, begging God's mercy, before returning to his unseemly work.

Though on opposite poles of the "righteous" scale, the characters in Jesus' parable are not so different, one from another.

Each is enslaved. The Pharisee in his rigid worldview and atrophied love of neighbor; the tax collector in the spiritual swamp through which he wades each day.

What would it mean for the Pharisee to be "free indeed"? To regard himself with grateful humility, and others in the temple—the thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors—as neighbors whom the law requires him to love.

And how might Jesus free the tax collector? Short of enrolling the tax collector in a job retraining program at the local community college, Jesus' hands are tied. But his heart is not. To borrow Jesus' own words in another Gospel, Jesus "looked on him and loved him" (Mark 10:21). Jesus deemed the tax collector justified, right, good, at peace with God—because he recognized his need, and in spite of the way he earned his daily bread.

Justification before God is freedom that only Jesus can provide. Freedom is offered only to those who know themselves to be enslaved.

Jesus' truth is the truth that sets all the enslaved free. Who is justified in the eyes of God? Who is the freed slave? Only the repentant sinner, on Reformation Day and every day.