

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Pastor Bill Uetrict Reformation 10/30/11

Some things are just predictable. If it is winter and you live in Muskegon, it will snow. You can depend on that. If it is winter and you see Bill, he will be wearing a Bill Cosby sweater from the eighties. It's just predictable. If it is the presidential election season or, for that matter, any election season, you can count on arguments about taxes and you can count on mud being slung. Mudslinging during election season is just as dependable as coffee in the hands of First Lutheran member Kent Johnson, ham sandwiches at funeral lunches, rain whenever an outside church event is planned, and green bean casseroles at potlucks.

There are many things about life that are predictable. In our second lesson for today from Romans Paul says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You can count on sin. It is predictable. I have always said that, of all the doctrines of the church, sin is the one that can be scientifically verified. The reality of God cannot be scientifically verified, but sin . . . I mean, the evidence, empirical and anecdotal, is quite clear. Just look around. Glance at your families. Observe the culture. Sit in my office once in a while. Watch Jersey Shore, The Real Housewives of California, Desperate Housewives, or Hoarders. Look at your own craziness. We are messed up. We are a wreck. We live our lives alienated from other people, preoccupied with ourselves, so deeply entrenched in our own perspectives that we can't get anything done except for grandstanding, so hard hearted and unimaginative that violence seems to be the only way for us to respond to conflict. Hostility, separation, resentment, fear, anxiety—all signs that sin reigns, all signs that you can count on sin. It is predictable. Same old same old!

Jeremiah speaks of the “same old same old” when he mentions how the ancestors of the Israelites and the Judeans broke the covenant that God made with them when he rescued them out of the land of Egypt. God established a special relationship with his people, but they were adulterous; they ran around with other gods. If you read much of the Old Testament, you will find that this story is repeated over and over again. God’s people break their relationship with God over and over again. They bow down at the feet of other gods, like Baal and his buddies over and over again.

One gets the impression that the Jesus of our gospel lesson for today has done a lot of thinking about the over-and-over-again character of human sin. When the Jews who had believed in him questioned his comment about their being enslaved, he said: “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” The fact that you do it so often, he is saying, is evidence that you *have* to do it, that you are enslaved to it. Oh my gosh, predictability seems to reign. Sin is so predictable. It seems that it is part of our DNA.

I have to wonder: Is there anything new under the sun? Is there anything more to life than the same old same old? These are fundamentally important questions for this day in the church year, Reformation Day. If your response to the questions is “Yes,” then it seems to me that you have caught on to the spirit of this day. Reformation is not about that which is predictable. Reformation is not about the same old same old. Reformation is about that which can make an old, predictable world truly new.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” And this new covenant will not be a matter of the same old same old. You

see, in this covenant I will put my teaching within my people. I will put, so says the Lord, my heart within their hearts. They won't have to do what they have always had to do, that is, teach my heart and my ways to one another. No longer will they have to say to their children or to one another, "Know the Lord," for they all, from the greatest to the least, will know me; they will connect with me closely, live out of my ways when they deal with one another. The same old same old will give way to that which makes brand new. And what will enable that? What will transform the same old same? "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

Our God forgets, and our God forgives. Here is something new. Sin is old. Sin is so yesterday. Hostilities, resentments, anger, fear, violence—these are all so yesterday. They are so predictable. But in the midst of the predictability, in the midst of the same old same old, comes that which truly transforms, truly makes new. There is no distinction, Paul says. Everybody is wrapped up in life's predictability. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *but* they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the freedom that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.

God enters the messiness, you see. God enters the bloodiness of life. God enters the same old hostilities, resentments, and alienations. God gets dirty with life's predictability and in so doing God embraces our messed up, self-preoccupied, alienated, and unimaginative world with grace that is fresh and new. The cross of Christ is the embrace of God for a messed-up world. God forgives our sin and remembers our iniquity no more.

God's grace is what is truly new. The same old same old is transformed by a God who forgets, a God who forgives. New life for us

depends upon God's forgetfulness. Everything truly new *depends* on the forgiveness of sins. It *depends* upon the God who is busy offering a new start to individuals, groups, church bodies, and nations that have been alienated from one another for far too long. Everything truly new depends upon the One who has had enough of the predictability of sin.

I don't know about you, but I am **tired** of the same old same old: the same old hostilities, the same old resentments, the same old alienation, the same old anger, the same old fear and anxiety, the same old violence. I am tired of families that can't get along. I am tired of the pettiness and neediness that disrupt life in community. I'm tired of politicians and political parties that can't work together. I am tired of the anger that seethes in too many corners of this country. I am tired of wars that kill too many of our young people or scar them for the rest of their lives. I am tired of littered landscapes, polluted water, and hard-to-breathe air. I am ready for a new start. I am ready for restoration.

"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."
"They are now justified by his grace as a gift." Here lies the new start. Here also is the spark of the reformation. Here is the truth that transformed a church that was lost in the same old same old. Here is the news that can make us new. Walter Brueggemann says that "where there is no forgiveness and no forgetting, society is fated to replay the same old hostilities, resentments, and alienations." We just keep doing the same *old* nasty stuff. "Forgiveness," Brueggemann argues, "breaks the vicious cycles of such deathly repetition."

We live in light of the forgiveness and grace of God. We live in light of that which breaks the vicious cycles. We live in light of that which gives us a fresh start. I know that predictability can sometimes

be helpful. But the predictability of sin is squeezing the life out of life. It leads to vicious, violent cycles that bring only death. The forgiveness of God, freely given, the grace of God, freely given, is the breath of fresh air that brings life to life, brings newness to an old world, restores broken and hurting people, enlivens the church. This breath of fresh air is fundamentally what the church is about. We exist because of the forgiveness of sin. We exist because God justifies all by his grace as a gift. We exist because the Son sets us free from the predictability of sin, the Son takes us out of the land of the same old same old and places us in the Promise Land of freedom.

Live in that land. Live as if you have been given a fresh start. Prove Walter Brueggemann wrong in his claim that sometimes you and I prefer the same old same old, that we prefer the “vicious cycles of deathly repetition.” Join me in being tired of those vicious cycles. Give up on the same old hostilities. Come into the land of freedom. Come into the land where God’s forgiveness frees us up from the same old brokenness. Breathe in the spirit of the church-changing Reformation. The same old same old isn’t working; it’s making us miserable. God’s grace and forgiveness give us a fresh start. They lead us to joy, reconnection to people we are separated from, and the possibility of a world that is as it ought to be.