

Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021
“Nothing Required” (John 8:31-36)

There is an old joke that asks: How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? And the answer is: Only one, but the light bulb has to really want to change. Now, let's apply the same question to the Christian faith. How many gods does it take to save a human being? Again the answer is: only one, and the human doesn't even have to want to change. What we are called to remember on Reformation Sunday is that salvation is God's doing, not ours. God is so great, so gracious, that there is nothing required from us for our won salvation – not even the desire to be saved. This is what the Lutheran Reformation was all about. This is what the Christian faith is about. And it's the answer we hear in our gospel for today.

John tells us that Jesus offers freedom to the Jews who question him. They respond by claiming that they have never been in bondage to anyone. Perhaps they have forgotten the 400 years they spent in slavery under the Egyptians, or the years spent in exile under the Babylonians, or even now, that they are under Roman rule. Still, they claim they have always been free. But Jesus points out to them that they are indeed in bondage. They are in bondage to sin, and one who is in bondage cannot create his own freedom. It's like the people of Israel in Egypt. They couldn't free themselves from their slavery. No, it required the strong hand of God to do that for them. The same holds true for their bondage to sin. And it holds true for those of us today who are in bondage to sin. If we had the power and authority to set ourselves free, then we wouldn't be in bondage in the first place.

Jesus is telling the Jews that they can't set themselves free. And neither can we. Someone else has to do it for us. And who is that someone – who not only has the power and authority – but also the *will* to set us free? It is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. If he declares that we are free from bondage to sin, then we are free indeed. There is no one else who has the ability to do that.

So, what do we have to do to convince Jesus to set us free? Again, the answer is nothing. We don't give him the power or the authority to set us free. His power and authority come from God the Father, not from us. And we certainly don't give him the will to do so. His will to redeem humankind existed from the very beginning of creation.

Well, what about this, you might ask: *Can he set us free even if we don't particularly want to be set free? What if we don't have any faith in him? He can't set us free then, can he?* Of course, he can! He is the Son of God, after all, and the Son of God can do anything he chooses to do. He has the power and the authority and he has the will to love us and forgive us at any point in our lives. He doesn't need our permission or our approval. He doesn't need our faith or our belief. He doesn't need our piety or our good works. There is nothing required from us for Christ to do what is in his very nature to do.

Now, although this is abundantly clear in the gospel, and equally clear in the writings of St. Paul, the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century had all but hidden this good news from the people of that day. The church declared that there was a three-step ritual one had to go through in order to receive forgiveness and salvation: 1) You had to feel bad about your sins; that was called contrition. 2) You had to have a priest hear your confession and pronounce absolution.

3) You had to make satisfaction for your sins by doing some good work – like praying the Rosary or (better yet) giving money to the church. Only when you had done all three of these things, said the church, were you forgiven and your salvation secured.

But Martin Luther and his contemporaries rejected this notion because it was contrary to the clear teaching of the gospel that salvation depends entirely on God and not on anything we do. The central article of the Augsburg Confession – the document that shapes the doctrine of the Lutheran Church is Article 4 on Justification. It states: *It is taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works or satisfactions...but we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith.* This article lifts up the grace of God, which fills every nook and cranny of our lives. It tells us that nothing we do saves us. No matter how noble and self-sacrificing our deeds; no matter how clear and correct our beliefs; no matter how strong our faith or desire to be saved; none of these things contribute one milligram to our salvation. We are saved by the grace of God alone.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our understanding of baptism. In baptism – as in communion – God comes to us; we do not come to God. Therefore, we believe it is entirely proper to baptize infants as well as adults. The Anabaptists in the time of Luther said that it was not right to baptize people unless they had some conscious faith and trust in God. Therefore, they declared, the baptizing of infants was invalid. *Nothing could be further from the truth*, Luther said. For Lutherans, the very essence of baptism is seen when an infant – who has no particular desire to be baptized, who has no conscious faith, or the ability to ask for salvation – is brought to the font to receive the gracious gift of God's love and forgiveness. Baptizing an infant, you see, is a clear demonstration that we are *not* saved by anything we do, believe, or desire – but by the grace of God alone.

At this point, you may be pondering at least two issues. The first is probably the element of faith. Doesn't the Apostle Paul say that we are saved by grace through faith? Absolutely – but our faith is given to us as a gift from God. Through the Holy Spirit, the seed of faith is planted within each of us. God creates in our hearts the desire to follow him. This is not something we can do on our own. Ephesians 2:8 tells us: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*

This *gift of God* of which Paul speaks is not just grace or salvation, but faith as well. Salvation, grace, and faith are all one gift. We can no more separate faith or grace from salvation as we could water from life. They are intrinsically tied together. So, if we can't merit our own salvation, then faith can't be by human response. Our faith is a gift of God's grace – just like salvation. Furthermore, if we view faith as a condition for salvation, it then becomes a work (something we do), and our works don't contribute anything to our salvation.

And this probably raises a second question: *But doesn't Jesus instruct us to do good works?* And the answer is YES, he does, but not as a means of being saved. Good works are our response to the good news that we are saved. They are the fruit that is born out of us when we

accept that God has already done everything; that he has made the supreme sacrifice for us by dying on the cross. It is then – out of thankfulness and gratitude – that we perform good works as a response to the love of God through Christ so that others may experience his love as well. So, you see, there is nothing required.

A man once died and appeared at the gates of heaven. St. Peter told him that he was welcome to enter, but he needed a thousand points to do so. That should be easy, the man thought to himself. *I was an active Lutheran all my life*, he said. *That's 50 points*, replied Peter. *I sang in the church choir for many years*, the man said. *That's 50 points*, said Peter. *I dropped out of choir when I couldn't sing anymore*, he said. *I'll give you 100 points for that*, said Peter.

And now the man began to get nervous. So he said somewhat desperately. *One of my cousins is a pastor and my uncle used to be a missionary.*

Okay, Peter said, *I'll give you 50 points for that.*

Good grief, the man said, *I need 1,000 points to get into heaven and I only have 250. At this rate, the only way I'll ever get in is by the grace of God alone.*

That's 750 points! Peter said. *Come on in!*

How many gods does it take to save a human being? Only one, and nothing is required by the human. It's all God's doing. That is the nature of God the Father. It is the mission and purpose of his Son, Jesus Christ. The grace of God – freely given – through faith – also freely given – has set us free indeed. Salvation is ours *only* by what Christ has done. Amen.