

**REFORMATION SUNDAY 2017
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

UNCHAINED

WHEN WE LIVED IN NEWTON, NC OUR BACK DECK LOOKED DIRECTLY OUT ON OUR NEIGHBOR'S BACK YARD. SITTING ON OUR DECK ONE MORNING WE WATCHED AS THEY CONSTRUCTED A CHAIN-LINK CAGE OF SOME SORT. IT WAS PROBABLY 12' BY 12' - NOT VERY BIG AND IT SAT AT THE VERY BACK OF THEIR LOT. IT DIDN'T LOOK VERY SERVICABLE SO WE WEREN'T SURE HOW IT WOULD BE USED. BUT THEN ONE DAY WE FOUND OUT. THEY BROUGHT A 2/3 MONTH OLD BLACK LAB PUPPY OUT TO THAT CAGE - AND CHAINED HIM THERE. THE CHAIN WAS A LITTLE SHORTER THAN THE SIZE OF THE CAGE IN EITHER DIRECTION. AND THAT PUPPY STAYED CHAINED THERE FOR WEEKS - OFTENTIMES WITHOUT FOOD OR WATER. OUR CALLS TO ANIMAL CONTROL WENT UNHEEDED, SO WHEN THEY WERENT HOME, WE'D TAKE WATER AND FOOD TO HIM. ONE DAY, I WAS READING ON OUR DECK AND I SAW HIM BREAK LOOSE. I'M NOT SURE HOW, BUT HE HAD GOTTEN THE CHAIN OFF FROM AROUND HIS NECK AND HE WAS BURROWING HIS WAY OUT. HE MADE IT. HE WAS FREE. BUT THEN A STRANGE THING HAPPENED. HE ONLY MOVED AS FAR AWAY FROM THAT CAGE AS THE LENGTH OF HIS CHAIN HAD BEEN.

HE DIDN'T KNOW HE COULD GO ANY FURTHER. HE WAS FROZEN THERE. HE WAS BOUND NOT ONLY BY THAT VISIBLE CHAIN - BUT BY AN INVISIBLE ONE AS WELL.

AS I SAT DOWN THIS WEEK TO PREPARE FOR THIS 500TH ANNIVERSARY REFORMATION DAY SERMON, THAT IMAGE POPPED INTO MY MIND BECAUSE IT SEEMS TO ILLUSTRATE LUTHER'S JOURNEY. HE, TOO, WAS CHAINED - CHAINED BY A BELIEF IN AN ANGRY, PUNISHING GOD, CHAINED BY A BELIEF THAT HE MUST EARN HIS WORTHINESS BEFORE HE COULD STAND BEFORE THAT PUNITIVE GOD, CHAINED BY HIS BELIEF THAT HE MUST KEEP EVERY IOTA OF THE LAW OF MOSES EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY BEFORE HE WOULD BE WORTHY OF GOD'S LOVE...CHAINED...AND EVEN WHEN HE WOULD MOMENTARILY BREAK THAT CHAIN AND MOVE TOWARD FREEDOM, THAT INVISIBLE CHAIN WAS THERE HOLDING HIM BACK... UNTIL - UNTIL - IN THE MONESTARY - IN HIS STUDY OF THE SCRIPTURES HE FOUND THESE VERSES IN ROMANS THAT ARE BEFORE US THIS MORNING.

PAUL, WRITING TO THE CHURCH IN ROME, DECLARES THAT NO ONE, ON HIS OR HER OWN, CAN STAND RIGHTEOUS BEFORE A RIGHTEOUS GOD. NO ONE! NOT ONE! BUT THEN COMES THAT GOOD

NEWS. WE DON'T HAVE TO. WE ARE NOT JUSTIFIED BY OUR OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS, REMEMBER, BUT BY THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST – AS A GIFT – A GIFT FREELY GIVEN SO THAT WE MIGHT BE JUSTIFIED – WHICH MEANS NOT ONLY NOT CONDEMNED BUT SET FREE, SET RIGHT, RETURNED TO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD – THE RELATIONSHIP GOD INTENDED FROM THE VERY BEGINNING – NOT BY OUR OWN WORKS – BUT BY THE SALVIFIC WORK OF CHRIST JESUS. “WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE, AS A GIFT, THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS.” THOSE BECAME THE FOUNDATIONAL WORDS OF LUTHER AS HE SOUGHT TO RENEW THE CHURCH. NO LONGER WAS HE CHAINED TO HIS FALSE BELIEF IN AN ANGRY GOD WHO DEMANDED PERFECTION BEFORE FORGIVENESS. HE WAS SET FREE FROM BOTH VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHAINS TO LOVE AND SERVE GOD AND OTHERS– NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT HE WAS REQUIRED TO DO – BUT BECAUSE OF WHAT GOD, THROUGH CHRIST, HAD DONE FOR HIM. THE CHAINS WERE GONE. HE NOW KNEW THE GOD OF WHOM JEREMIAH SPOKE – THE GOD WHO HOLDS US IN THE PALM OF HIS HANDS AND REMEMBERS OUR SIN KNOW MORE. HE NOW KNEW THAT TRUTH WAS NOT A DOCTRINE OR A PROPOSITION – OR IN OUR DAY WE COULD ADD NOT A BUMPER STICKER... HE NOW KNEW

TRUTH AS PERSON – THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST HIS LORD. HE HEARD ANEW THE WORDS OF JESUS....”IF THE SON MAKES YOU FREE, YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED.” AND THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION WAS OFF AND RUNNING. AND ON THIS DAY, OCTOBER 29, 2017, WE GATHER TO CELEBRATE THE TRUTH OF THE SCRIPTURES LUTHER DISCOVERED 500 YEARS AGO NOW - GOD’S GIFT OF GRACE, MERCY AND LOVE REVEALED TO US THROUGH CHRIST JESUS. AND AS LUTHER WOULD SAY, THIS IS MOST CERTAINLY TRUE!

BUT LUTHER WOULD ALSO ADD - AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? A MORE CONTEMPORARY VERSION OF THAT QUESTION BEING, “SO WHAT?”

WELL, IT SEEMS TO ME THERE’S BOTH PROMISE AND CHALLENGE THERE FOR US. THERE’S PROMISE – PROMISE THIS BROKEN WORLD NEEDS TO HEAR AGAIN AND AGAIN. WE LIVE IN A TIME WHEN “POWER OVER” AND GREED AND DISHONESTY AND SELF-GRANDIZEMENT ARE THE NORMS OF THE DAY...WE LIVE IN A TIME WHEN INDIFFERENCE AND APATHY ABOUT COMMITMENT TO ONE’S FAITH RULES THE DAY...WE LIVE IN A TIME WHEN SOCIETY’S NEED FOR GOD SEEMS TO BE FADING AWAY. AND, IN TIMES LIKE THIS, WE NEED TO HEAR AGAIN... THE CHURCH NEEDS TO PROCLAIM BOLDLY AGAIN...

THE WORDS OF THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL...GOD'S PROMISE TO THE WORLD – FULFILLED BY THE CROSS AND EMPTY TOMB. “YOU ARE MINE...I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME...AND YOU ARE MINE, SAYS THE LORD.

BUT THERE'S MORE. THERE'S THE CHALLENGE. BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AND HISTORIANS TELL US WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF ANOTHER REFORMATION. PHYLLIS TICKLE, IN HER BOOK *THE GREAT EMERGENCE* POINTS OUT THAT ABOUT EVERY 500 YEARS THE CHURCH GOES THROUGH WHAT SHE CALLS “A RUMMAGE SALE.” – THE OLD THAT ISNT WORKING ANYMORE IS THROWN OUT AND WAY IS MADE FOR THE NEW. STARTING WITH THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND WORKING HER WAY THROUGH 500 YEAR SPANS – DR. TICKLE NAMES THE REFORMATIONS – 500 YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF CHRIST CAME THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. 500 YEARS LATER, THE GREAT SCHISM (THE BREAK BETWEEN THE GREEK AND EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES), 500 YEARS LATER, THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION – AND NOW 500 YEARS LATER – HERE WE ARE....ANOTHER REFORMATION. SHE CALLS IT “THE GREAT EMERGENCE.” AND WITH THIS NEW REFORMATION COMES OUR CHALLENGE – HOW TO BE CHURCH IN THIS 21ST CENTURY REFORMATION!

WE'RE FAR ENOUGH ALONG, IT SEEMS, TO KNOW WHAT DOESN'T WORK ANYMORE - WHAT NEEDS TO BE THROWN OUT (ALTHOUGH SOME WOULD QUESTION THAT)- BUT WE HAVENT LEARNED YET WHAT WILL WORK - WE HAVENT LEARNED WHAT WILL WORK FOR THE CHURCH - THE BODY OF CHRIST ON THIS EARTH - SO THAT WE MAY BE AS POWERFUL A FORCE IN OUR DAY AS LUTHER'S REFORMATION WAS IN HIS DAY. WE NEED TO LEARN THAT. WE MUST LEARN THAT. AFTER ALL, WE ARE A CHURCH ALWAYS REFORMING. WE MUST, IN THIS 21ST CENTURY, REFORM THE CHURCH.

BUT PERHAPS THAT'S NOT AS DIFFICULT AS IT APPEARS. WHAT IF OUR CALL IS TO RETURN TO THE SCRIPTURES AND RE-DISCOVER THE GOD WHO REMEMBERS OUR SIN NO MORE...THE CHRIST WHOSE RIGHTEOUSNESS CLOTHES US...THE JESUS WHO IS THE TRUTH? WHAT IF OUR CALL IS TO GROUND OURSELVES IN WORSHIP AND PRAYER AND SERVICE TO OTHERS...AFTER ALL, JUSTIFICATION NOT ONLY RESTORES US TO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD; IT DEMANDS THAT WE HAVE RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER, ESPECIALLY THOSE WE FIND DIFFICULT TO ABIDE. WHAT IF WE NAMED THE CHAINS THAT ENSLAVE US IN OUR DAY AND TIME- BOTH WITHIN THE CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY - WHAT IF WE NAMED THOSE CHAINS AND BROKE LOOSE ,

NOT LIKE THE PUPPY- BUT REALLY BROKE LOOSE - AND RAN TO FREEDOM? AND WHAT IF WE TRULY EXPERIENCED THAT FREEDOM AS SETTING ASIDE OUR NEED TO EARN GOD'S GRACE AND INSTEAD SET ABOUT DOING JUSTICE AND LOVING KINDNESS AND WALKING HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD? WHAT IF? WHAT IF WE, THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH, BOLDLY PROCLAIMED ALL THAT? WHAT IF, WITH LUTHER WE WOULD BOLDLY PROCLAIM TO THE WORLD, "HERE I STAND I CAN DO NO OTHER. GOD HELP ME."

IN THOSE WATERS OF BAPTISM WE ARE NAMED, CLAIMED AND REDEEMED AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD AND GIVEN THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO CALLS US THROUGH THE GOSPEL, WHO ENLIGHTENS US WITH HIS GIFTS, WHO MAKE US HOLY AND KEEPS US IN THE TRUE FAITH.

WHAT IF WE CLAIMED OUR HERITAGE AND LIVED IT ANEW IN THIS 21ST CENTURY? WHAT IF? THINK ABOUT IT. AMEN.