

11-3-19 Jeremiah 31:31-34. Family: Where you are free to be yourself

“You are not good enough. You are not good enough. You are not good enough.” That thought pounded away in a young son’s soul with every beat of his heart. All this young man knew of a father was someone who was angry with him for not living up to his expectations. His father on earth was disappointed he didn’t go into the right career. But the Father he knew in heaven seemed so much worse. This was a Father who was so angry over sin that he couldn’t be approached except through his Son Jesus, and even Jesus was often too angry to go to the Father on behalf of sinners (Nohl, 24).

So this young man grew up in anguish, profoundly understanding the truth of that statement, “You are not good enough.” He looked at his life with nothing but despair. “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt, with the most disturbed conscience imaginable, that I was a sinner before God. I did not love, indeed I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners and secretly I was angry with God” (Kittelson 88).

Who was this lost soul? Martin Luther. This young man’s concept of family brought him to the conclusion that there was only one thing left to do. “I believed that I would have to do good works until they made Christ love and forgive me” (Nohl, 34).

Did you grow up with this kind of a system with your earthly family where your worth as a child was measured by your report card or the number of trophies in your room? Do the scars of your childhood slogan “not good enough” keep you running on an eternal treadmill that will never get you to your destination, the arms of your Father in heaven?

Today we celebrate the Reformation. This day is about breaking the shackles of what our hearts thought they knew. It’s about reforming our concept of what God is really like. It’s about breaking the ladder we climb to gain God’s approval and realizing our Father in heaven figured out a way to be pleased with you all on his own. Today, we come face to face with our hearts deepest fear, “You are not good enough.” There we find a Father who is totally different than we imagined, not fierce and exacting, but warm and gracious. Today, we do what families do! It’s story time and we listen as our heavenly Father tells us the amazing story of his love. In that story, we find a family we never thought existed—a **family where you are free to be yourself.**

Our reading from Jeremiah picked up near the end of the story. But we are going to rewind to hear some of the beginning of this story of God and his children. That way we can see exactly how things work in this family. God tells his people, **“How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel.” (Jer. 3:19,20.)**

This is a Father who longs to show love, while his children run away after their own desires. Yet he still beckons, **“Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding” ... “If you will return, O Israel, return to me.” (3:22. 4:1)** but they do not return. They keep running away.

What is the Father to do? He thinks to himself, **“My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good” (4:22).** So the Father is forced to send someone to bring them back, to punish them and make them realize what they’ve done. It pains him to do so, yet **“Their evil deeds have no limit; Should I not punish them for this?” (5:28,29).** His hand is forced by their actions. So he says about his people: **“They greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet. So the Lord does not accept them; he will now remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins” (14:10)**

If only they would realize this punishment was for their own good! **“Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the**

heart!” **Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me” (4:18,19).** It hurts the Father to punish more than it hurts the children.

Still it seems no use! **“They cling to their deceit; they refuse to return, I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. No one repents of his wickedness saying, ‘What have I done?’” (8:5,6) “Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” (8:12).**

So the Father says with anguish, **“You have rejected me,” (15:6) “Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you.” (17: 4) “Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing...because your guilt is so great and your sins so many” (Jer. 30:12,14). “How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?” (Jer. 31:22).**

At this point we pause in the telling of the story. We’ve come to the same point of despair we started with. We see ourselves in those rebellious people and we are faced with the torturous reality once again, **“You are not good enough.”** Yet the story we’ve heard so far takes it even one step further. This story points at you and says, **“You are not good, at all!”** And we cannot escape this reality no matter how much we squirm, dodge, blame, rationalize or hide. We know the truth underneath it all, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (16:9)**

This is all young Martin Luther knew and he hated God for it. Despair was his constant tormenter, **“Deep and deeper still I fell. Life had become a living hell. So firmly sin possessed me.” (CW. 377:2)** This is all we can know from our conscience, from the truth our hearts tell us. We cannot please God. For generations and generations, no one knew the other half of the story or understood what it meant.

So let us listen again pick up where we left off as God finishes the love story he began. The Father asks, **“Why do you cry out over your wound, your pain that has no cure?”** The Father’s children had brought this on themselves, there was nothing they could do to be cured. But this is what Father himself says, **“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. (Jer. 31:3)** My love for you cannot be exhausted. So I will take this upon myself. You are not good enough to heal yourself, **“But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds.” (Jer. 30:15,17)**

So the Father looks once again on his wayward child, **“Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore, my heart yearns for him. I have great compassion for him,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 31:20).**

Moved by his unfailing love, the Father acts once again. He makes a promise, **“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called; The Lord Our Righteousness.” (Jer. 23: 5,6).** This promise was not based on whether the people would obey or not, but only on God and his love. **The Lord Our Righteousness,** he is the one who will make his people good and righteous.

This new promise and covenant will not be like the old one. **“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer. 31:33)** After everything these children have put this Father through, the offended party, Father, comes to his wayward and guilty children and says, **“I will be your God and you will be my people.”**

This is how you will know me and know what it means to be a Father. **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:34).**

Unbelievable! You say this story is. You’re dead right. But unbelievable doesn’t mean it’s a fairy tale, it means it’s God’s doing and it can only be accepted by faith. This is the unbelievable story of a

Father whose love you don't have to earn, but who gives it freely. This is the Father Luther came to know and love and trust in. This is the story of your Heavenly Father, who looks at you in spite of all that you are, in spite of every way in which you are not good, and he says, "**I have loved you with an everlasting love. I will be your God and you will be my people.**" So far have I put your sins out of mind that they will never again be remembered.

This is the story of your family, where God is your Father and Jesus is your brother and **you are free to be yourself**. That doesn't mean you are free to do whatever you want or live in any way you please. You know that's the lie of your deceitful heart talking. "Free to be yourself" means two things. First, you don't have to be afraid to admit you're a sinner. You don't have to pretend you're good, because you and God and everyone else knows you're not. God wants you back! Here in God's family, you are free to admit, "I'm a big sinner with real sins." Here in God's family you have loving Father and a big Savior, not for imaginary, pretend sins, but for real sins!

"Free to be yourself" means something else too. In this new covenant, your Father says you will all know him, and he will write his law on your hearts. In this new covenant, the Lord is your righteousness. He lived for you, in place of you, and now lives in you. To be yourself is really to live the life of righteousness that Christ gave you. So it is most certainly true. We are family, and in this family, you are free to live the life Christ lives in you. That is who you truly are and this is where you belong—God's dearly loved children. Amen.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Amen.

Kittleson, James, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of a Man and His Career*. Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis, 1986.

Nohl, Frederick. *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*. Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, 2003.