

Why the Gospel is More Wizard of Oz-y than the Law – May 11, 2014

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Romans 3:21-26

This week I've been thinking about reformation. So, of course, I thought about Reformation Sunday. We've come a long way Baby. For instance: We Protestants are no longer under the Pope. Our clergy can marry. We let people read the Bible for themselves. Not only that, but many denominations now ordain the ladies *and* the gays. That is to say, we are not nearly as ignorant as our forebears and so today we celebrate *ourselves*.

Yet what do the texts assigned for Reformation Sunday talk about? Sin. What we get on Reformation Day is not a victory parade for the Protestant Reformation, but a lot of talk about sin and law. "*All sin and fall short of the glory of God and all who sin are slaves to sin and that through the law comes knowledge of sin.*" Sin, sin, sin. Obviously the people who decide what the readings are for things like Reformation Sunday, didn't get the memo that what we are really celebrating is our own awesomeness, and how much more clever we modern Christians are, than those who came before us who naively believed in things like sin and Law.

Plus, in an age of self-care and therapy and high self esteem, and especially in so-called progressive Christianity, sin is not such a popular topic. In the United Methodist church planting business these days, there is a trend toward eliminating the confession and absolution at the beginning of our liturgies. Why? Because it's a downer and people don't want to hear they are sinners.

I personally think that's a shame, but I should confess that, at the age of 50 — after leaving my conservative Christian upbringing — when first I experienced the confession and absolution in a United Methodist liturgy, I thought it was awkward. I didn't like the part where everyone in church said what bad people they are, and the pastor, from the distance of the chancel and the purity of their white robe said, "*God forgives you.*"

And my suspicion is that this was because when I heard "*you are a sinner,*" what I really heard is, "*you are a bad, immoral person*" and hey, if I am someone who doesn't cheat

on their taxes or their spouse, and doesn't murder or steal, then I don't really want to spend my Sunday mornings having someone in a white robe imply that I do.

But Martin Luther had a way of talking about sin that makes a whole lot more sense to me now. He reminds us that sin is bigger than simple immorality. Sin, according to Luther, is being 'curved in on self' without a thought for God or the neighbor. In that case, sin is missing the mark and it's all the ways we put ourselves in the place of God.

It can be alcoholism or passive aggression. It can be the hateful things we think but never say, or it can be adultery, or it can be that feeling of superiority when we are helping others. Sin is the fact that my ideals and values are never enough to make me always do what I should, feel what I should, think what I should. And anything that reveals those "shoulds" to me is what we call The Law, the Law being the very thing St. Paul in his letter to the Romans said reveals sin. The "shoulds" in our lives are the things that make us see how far off the mark we are.

No matter what we think the "shoulds" are – personal morality and family values and niceness and conservative political convictions *or* inclusivity and recycling and eating local and progressive political convictions...there is always always, no matter how hard we try, a gap between our ideal self and our actual self.

And usually no one but us knows just HOW short we fall from the glory of God. But *we* know; and in those moments alone, when again we are beating ourselves up or trying to deny it, or again making promises of self-improvement, in those solitary moments we know.

It looks like every feminist who in secret hates her body, and every televangelist who's addicted to porn, and every social worker who doesn't actually look into the eyes of the homeless man they pass every day on the corner. They all know what the law can do to us. How cruel the distance between our ideal self and our actual self can feel. And that feeling of not ever really hitting the mark, whatever mark that is, is the feeling of the Law convicting you.

Martin Luther knew what it felt like for the Law to convict him, accuse him, and leave him with nowhere to rest. And if you want to know what really sparked the Protestant Reformation it is the fact that feeling this way, Luther read that passage we just heard from Romans, "*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift.*"

And he believed it to be true and because he believed that God's grace is a gift, he no longer accepted what the church had for so long taught: that we are really saved by the works of the Law. The medieval church had pawned off Law as Gospel and Luther dared to know the difference, and then he became a preacher of Grace and that changed everything. But here's the thing: pawning off Law as Gospel isn't a medieval thing and it's not a Catholic thing. It's a human thing and we do it all the time. The church does it, we do it, society does it. It's like a disease.

So, in support of Reformation, I offer you a way to spot the difference between Law and Gospel: You can tell the Law because it is almost always an if-then proposition – If you follow all the rules in the Bible God *then* will love you and you will be happy. *If* you lose 20 pounds *then* you will be worthy to be loved. *If* you live a perfectly righteous Green eco lifestyle *then* you will be worthy of taking up space in the planet. *If* you never have a racist or sexist or homophobic thought *then* you will be worthy of calling other people out on *their* racism and sexism and homophobia.

The Law is always conditional and it is never anything anyone can do perfectly. When we treat Law as Gospel there can never be life and happiness and worthiness. Under the Law there are only 2 options: pride and despair. When fulfilling the “shoulds” is the only thing that determines our worthiness we are either prideful about our ability to follow the rules compared to others or we despair at our inability to perfectly do anything. Either way, it's still bondage.

And that's why the Gospel is different. The Gospel is not an if-then proposition. It's more Wizard of Oz'y than that. The Gospel is a because because because because proposition. *Because* God is our creator, and *because* we rebel against the idea of being created beings, and insist on trying to be God for ourselves, and *because* God will not play by our rules, and *because* in the fullness of time when God had had quite enough of all of that, God became human in Jesus Christ to show us who God really is, and *because* when God came to God's own and we received him not, and *because* God would not be deterred, God went so far as to hang from the cross we built and did not even lift a finger to condemn, but said forgive them they know not what they are doing, and *because* Jesus Christ defeated even death and the grave and rose on the 3rd day, and *because* we all sin and fall short and are forever turned in on ourselves, and forget that we belong to God and that none of our success guarantee this and none of our failures exclude this, and *because* God loves God's creation God refuses for our sin and brokenness and inability to always do the right things to be the last word, *because* God came to save and not to judge, and **therefore...therefore** you are saved by grace as a

gift and not by the works of the law, and this truth will set you free like no self-help plan or healthy living or social justice work “shoulds” can ever do.

This is why we will never get rid of the confession and absolution in the liturgy. It's Law that puts us in the position of hearing Gospel. It is a moment when truth is spoken, without apology and without hesitation and perhaps for the only time all week, and it will crush you and then put you back together. It re-forms us. It's re-formation. And this is most certainly true. Alleluia. Amen.