

Reformation Sunday
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Romans 3:19-28 John 8:31-36
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 30, 2022 (Traditional)

For three summers during my college years, I worked on a pig farm outside of Orion Illinois. Usually I was working on my own, with the pigs. But one day, my boss Mr. Washburn had me help him redo a cement floor inside a storage house. This was a big floor to do the way we did it—one shovelful at a time—probably 500 square feet.

Like I said, usually I had all the lone-wolf grunt jobs on the farm. But for this, I was working with my boss's family. There was grandpa, who was probably about 70 years old, Mr. Washburn my boss, and two sons who were just a little older than me.

These were nice, warm, friendly people. They couldn't care less who I was or where I was from, as long as I was doing my best. But I was 18 years old, and I was just insecure enough at that time to feel uncomfortable, like I was an outsider. I was not part of this close farming family circle. And there I was with my long flowing beautiful blond hair, and my soft city boy piano hands. Like I said, they didn't care. But let's just put it this way: I felt I had to show them. I was going to prove myself to them.

I used to be in good shape believe it or not, and I've always liked heavy work. I decided right away that for every shovelful of cement that the youngest son carried into that enclosure, I was going to carry two. And for the first couple of hours, I did. And it was OK. The day was sunny and beautiful, outside you could see forever across the rolling fields, the birds were singing. The family was in a good mood, talking and laughing. But after two hours shoveling as fast as I could possible go, I descended quickly into the 7th level of hell. I was gulping for air. My arms felt like molten lead. Every joint was aching. I tried to keep up the pace, but after a while grandpa was moving faster than I was. Right before lunch, he smiled and told me, "Boy, it's hard to go slow, but my doctor says I have to: I had a heart-attack last month." I was like, Oh come on.

So at lunch break, there I was miserably eating my ham sandwich. I was defeated, and feeling even more like an outsider. I even felt kind of jealous of them, while they were making jokes and having a great time. Well, long story short, I did get through the day somehow. But it was a hard lesson for me to learn.

How can two people do the same work—even live parallel lives—but have completely opposite attitudes towards life and the work they do? Jesus, in our Reformation Day gospel goes to the core of it: "The slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever." It totally makes sense to me, because of that experience. That's where I was that day, shoveling cement. I was literally the hired servant, not part of the family. Like I said, they did everything they could to make me feel like family that day. But that's not where I was. From the beginning, in my own heart, mind and soul, I was the outsider trying to get in. And that basic place you live from—that basic identity you live out of—is going to shape your experience and your perception of everything you do

in life. Over time it's going to affect your performance, too. Jesus is telling us in the gospel: It's not where you're trying to get in life. It's where you start from.

Trying to get in with the family, I had to prove something. That's spiritual insecurity. I had to gain my place with them. And since I started from that insecurity, I ended with that insecurity. Everything I did just proved to me that I wasn't part of the family. Jesus says, "the son has a place in the family forever." As a son or a daughter, you're born into your position. You're already there. You didn't do anything to get there. You were born there. It's not about climbing your way into that position. God has put us in that position in Jesus Christ. The Son has given us his place in front of the Father. That's mind-boggling, but that's God's promise. All we can do is trust it. All we can do is live out of that Word. Our place in God's family has nothing to do with what we've done to deserve it. This is a gift.

That experience on the farm also served as a good lesson for me of what the power of sin does to people. From the very start, I was desperately overreaching myself. I couldn't pace myself, I couldn't see the big picture. In the same way, when we forget who we belong to, when we forget the new, forgiven, renewed, full and complete identity God has given us in Christ, we start over-reaching. Over-controlling. Going too fast. Why? Because all we can do is compare ourselves to the people around us. We define ourselves by our environment. We judge ourselves by worldly, finite standards. After all, without God, what else do we have? We become hired servants trying to gain something we don't even know, much less attain. And that's what sin does to us. The ladder we're trying to climb just keeps on going up and up. After a while we're just in a great big hurry to climb up to our coffin.

On Reformation Day, we talk about the difference between being born into God's family through what Jesus did for us, and trying to get to our own destination by climbing the ladder of comparison. The church back in Martin Luther's day was widely teaching a false message, that you had to climb that ladder to get to God. Luther, through reading scripture, relearned the good news: in Jesus Christ we can trust the transformational message that we're already at our destination. We have our destination. We have Jesus. It's about this beautiful, father/son, father/daughter relationship with God through Jesus Christ. So we live out of this salvation we have already received. We've got the victory, now we can spread it around.

Martin Luther experienced the difference between salvation by God's grace, and salvation by works—trying to climb the ladder—in his own life. As a young man, he thought his eternal future depended completely on himself—he became a monk and worked hard to gain his place in God's family. He entered himself into the religious beauty pageant. And it wasn't long before he found himself in a living hell. The best lesson he learned from being a monk was that he would never climb up, by his own power, to what God wanted him to be. He finally realized the biblical truth: A slave cannot work himself or herself into the household. A son, a daughter, are in the household because they were born there. In the end, Luther realized he needed to be remade. Reborn. That's when the good news of his own baptism finally hit him. He

experienced the power of the gospel. The good news about the Son of God, who had traded places with him, to give him his own place in God's house.

Do we deserve that kind of love? Forget deserving. Forget the math. All we can do is trust: that's how God loves us. And if we're living as if our life and our future depend on every shovelful we pick up, God wants us to get over ourselves.

What a great gift it is, to wake up every morning, and to know that no matter what hole we've dug for ourselves, God is here, dwelling with us. Through the Son who gave his life for ours, our place in the household has been made permanent. That's his promise, and there's only one hold we can have on that promise: faith. Sometimes I fall into that old trap: life looks like a bunch of desperate challenges, competitions which have been forced on me. Life-threatening battles. And I start thinking it all depends on me. Like I've got to win every battle so that I can win the war. Thank God for his Word of truth. I need to hear it: I've died in my baptism into Christ. The war is over. Now my life is in Christ. Now I live by his victory for me.

So now you and I can see the job in front of us for what it really is. Now it's just a matter of picking which ways we're going to love the people around us, using all our resources: through our work, with our service, with our giving. That's how simple it is! What can I do today, to show the world that I've already won?