

October 27, 2019 Reformation Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jeremiah 31:3,1-34, Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you. Amen.

Hear again the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

“I will put my law within them,
I will write it on their hearts;
I will be their God...and they shall be my people.”

I don't always title my preaching, but if I were...today...I'd call this something like:

“On our hearts, and in our bones.”

Some of you were in worship in September when I shared an update in the announcements.

Through much of August our community had been praying for Rebecca xxxxxxx.

Rebecca and her husband Alden were vacationing in Costa Rica when Rebecca suddenly became ill,
very ill, near-death-ill.

Rebecca made it through the most precarious nights.

Over the hard weeks that followed, our congregation and so many held Rebecca and Alden in prayer.

Over time she was transferred from Costa Rica to a hospital in Florida.

Over time she was able to breathe on her own and to begin to regain her strength.

Over time she was transferred yet again, closer, to St. Paul.

Rebecca went home this week, finally!

She continues to recover—and she's home!

When I shared the announcement in September, I had just days before, on your behalf, visited for the first time with Rebecca and Alden.

During that short visit, she told me how over these weeks, she felt “**surrounded by the cloud of witnesses,**” the prayers of you all and so many others.

She wanted me to thank you for praying, for being her witnesses.

Some of you recognize that line about the “cloud of witnesses” from the Bible, the 12th chapter of Hebrews to be precise.

Rebecca knew it, it was **on her heart and in her bones.**

Literally from her hospital bed Rebecca was using scripture, the God-promises, God's word, to speak *to us* and *about us*: she felt surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Today is Reformation Sunday.

We remember our namesake Martin Luther, and a cadre of other reformers from the 16th century:

Philip Melancthon and John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli and many, many more.

Through their writing, their preaching, their teaching, their living, the reforming change happened then...and it happens still...now.

Luther leaned into Paul's words from the letter to the Romans,

We are justified by grace as a gift.

In the Reformation, and still today, we're called back to these core truths, these deep-in-our-bones promises.

Counter to our culture, contrary to our own inclinations and our deepest fears:

We are not justified by our good works.

All that we do **flows from** this gift of grace, this free gift of grace from our merciful God.

Here at University Lutheran Church of Hope, Reformation Sunday often is also Confirmation Sunday.

We've got three awesome confirmation students—Seneca Brooks, Poonam Morgan, M'taleni Nashandi.

Their studies *continue* so next year at this time they'll affirm their baptisms and be confirmed.

For today, though, later in our service *we all* have a chance to affirm our baptisms.

At its best, this is a daily thing, for it's in our hearts, and in our bones.

I'll never forget a saint now at rest, Cora, who in her mid 90s told me that daily she prayed the very same prayer we'll use today: "Stir up the gift of your Holy Spirit..."

In this congregation prior to Confirmation, the students share their statements of faith.

Young people aren't the only ones who can do this.

Last week we had a team of preachers who told us stories of faith and struggle.

They reflected on their experience.

They pointed to where God is at work, often through other people.

Ann will do this in a few minutes.

Friends in Christ, I'm praying that this faith that is on your hearts and in your bones is expressed in your daily living: holding onto hope, sharing gratitude, loving your neighbors, leaning into the complexity.

Oh, I know, that may sound scary, but here's the thing, remember?

We are justified by grace as a gift.

Our lives flow *from* this gift of grace.

Today, in a spirit of reformation, we remember that woman in this denomination have been ordained now for 50 years.

It was 40 years ago that the first African American woman was ordained.

It was 10 years ago that the policies were changed making space for us out LGBTQ folks to be ordained and publically welcomed.

God is still at work reforming us, and there's more reformation still to come. God's not done yet.

There's one other more Confirmation practice that I've been thinking about.

It's traditional to give Bibles to students when they're Confirmed.

In recent years we began not simply giving out pristine, yet-to-be-opened Bibles, but rather passing the Confirmation Bibles around the congregation, each person taking a turn to hold them, pray for them, bless them, and then to write in them!

To mark them up, underlining favorite verses, circling great stories, adding doodles and questions.

These thoroughly blessed and colorfully marked up bibles, that's what we give to each of our students.

Why? Because we pray that the word is *on their hearts and in their very bones*.

And this word is shared best in community, one person to another.

That's what Rebecca was doing.

We want to have these precious words inside of ourselves so deeply, to weather all that life will bring.

I'm not just talking about the words of scripture, but most truly Jesus the Word.

Beloved ones, the freedom of Christ, the promises of God, shape us.

They strip away the false narratives that seek to tell us lies about who we are.

God's grace has claimed us...again.

Christ's word is *on our hearts and in our bones*.

It turns out that we can go through pain and grief.

We can endure challenge and uncertainty—life is hard sometimes.

We can experience abiding joy.

And always, always, God's grace is on our hearts and in our bones. Always. Amen.