

Reformation Sunday October 28, 2018 Zion Saddle River, NJ.

“What would you think if I sang out of tune? Would you get up and walk out on me?
Lend me your ears and I’ll sing you a song...And I’ll try not to sing out of key.
Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends.”

This song of the Beatles’ reminds us of how much friends help us through life. We get by with a little help from our friends.

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday which is the Sunday closest to October 31, the day when Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. What few people know is that Luther’s faith formation was not born in the isolation of a monastery but was nurtured by the Holy Spirit through a friend, a mentor, a spiritual supervisor/advisor in the monastery where Luther came eventually to struggle with his faith and to be captivated by the grace of God.

That friend was Johann von Staupitz. He had a direct influence on Luther’s spiritual and theological development. Later in life, Luther attributed much to his former monastic superior even though their nurturing friendship had moved on over the years. Staupitz, in his own faith journey, came to understand that it is God who initiates salvation through the gift of God’s undeserved favor and love, apart from anything a person can do, religiously or morally-(any amount of good works). Over time, Staupitz selected Luther to replace him as the professor of Bible at Wittenberg (1512), which Luther did soon after he received his doctoral degree. This was quite an honor.

However, as tensions increased between the established church and Luther, Staupitz encouraged Luther to submit to the authority of the church. When he would not, he released Luther from his vows as a monk, freeing him to pursue the reforms he considered essential for the proclamation of the Word of God. Staupitz would not join the efforts of Luther and the reformers; his friendship with Luther waned as the divisions within the church deepened.

Nonetheless, while Staupitz remained a supporter of the pope, his own writings were considered suspect and banned by the Counter-Reformation years after his and Luther’s death. Staupitz was caught in the middle of the voluminous changes taking place in his day.

The Epistle - second reading for this day, from Romans, is the gem of the Reformation, for Staupitz and Luther in their day and for us in our time: God puts those who have sinned against God into a right relationship with God, justifying them as a free gift, completely apart from anything deserved or even decided. In other words, God takes the initiative to make friends out of those who are enemies because they have fallen from God’s exacting demands of God’s law.

It was St. Augustine’s understanding of sin and grace that Luther’s superior and friend would impress upon him during their time together and would shape Luther’s own understanding of a judging God who cannot tolerate any injustice on our part against God’s holy law, but who also

cannot leave us left to our out-of-tune lives. To answer the Beatles question: No, God never walks out on us because our lives are sung out of tune. The message of Reformation Sunday is that God has reached out to us and to all the world, to turn us from being enemies of God into friends and from that new relationship, to live a new life, sustained by God's love and forgiveness.

On the long road of Luther's own faith transformation, he was brought to the realization that apart from God's grace in Jesus, we are not friends of God, but enemies of God, because our lives are not in tune with God's expectations. We fall short again and again of where God expects us to be.

The reading from Romans, the second reading for the Day of the Reformation, is the very Scripture that took hold of Luther, bringing him to his courageous fight for the Gospel in his day. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced."

According to God's law, only those who keep the Ten Commandments, fully and completely, not only in what should not be done, but also in what needs to be done, can be God's friends. No human being can possibly achieve such a standard in life. Therefore, no human being can become a friend of God's by what they do. "For no human being will be justified (put right) in God's sight" by deeds prescribed by the law," Paul writes. Before the Gospel can take root in our lives, we must live with this heavy tension of just how far we and our world have fallen from what God expects.

The discord that is experienced by us internally, in our broken relationships; the discord that we are seeing more and more in our nation as evidenced this past week with bombs sent by one who sought to threaten and bring harm to those who do not agree politically are all signs of how deeply our lives are sung out of tune. Yesterday's dreadful killing in Pittsburg, yet another sign of the power struggles that are literally taking lives in this nation. We cannot become numb to these acts and must ask why does this happen so often in our country?

Such increasing discord is alarming and should alarm us as we see, not only in our land, but in other countries, as well, deepening divisions based on hate and fear, and religious and racial prejudice. We cannot be complacent in the face of such fear and hate and must examine our own motivations and misunderstandings as they separate us from God and each other.

But God is not complacent. Although our human story is a cacophony in the ears of God, God does not walk out on us. Instead, God enters the battle, incarnate in a vulnerable baby, through his human life with all its struggles and joys, and onto a cross where God suffers for the pain and separation this has caused God and every human being.

Luther actually said that our waywardness is "stench in the nostrils of God." A bad smell gets your attention. God is a million times more sensitive to the horrible odors of our lives AND to the sweet fragrance and the perfect pitch of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through a living trust in him, his fine-tuned life, the sweet fragrance of his love become ours to the ears and nose of God. Jesus' goodness turns us from being enemies of God into friends.

St. Paul, in our reading goes on to share, *But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...for the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...*

Once this faith takes hold, from our baptism on, we begin a journey that moves us from death to life, where with such a friend as Jesus, we work with believers, doubters and non-believers sharing a mantra of justice and mercy in a mission to each other, to our community and to the world.

Our younger son is the principal bassoonist in the Puerto Rico Symphony in San Juan. We knew, first hand, of the struggles Puerto Rico and so many other places experienced at the hands of dreadful climate changes. This week, the orchestra was invited to LA to play with a rapper named Daddy Yankee. Daddy Yankee is from Puerto Rico. A multi-gifted young man, he was on the farm team of the Seattle Mariners, became injured, and is now a musician. The concert, in LA, was a fundraiser for victims and survivors of cancer, and proceeds from the recording will all go to support cancer patients. Our son said that it was fascinating to be a part of the production and found Daddy Yankee to be a caring person.

I can't say that Rap music has been number one on my chart. It's not easy for me to listen to it or keep up with what a Rapper is even singing. You might say that it sounds "out of tune" to me. I do know that Chance the Rapper seems like a fine person and has a heart for social justice. Learning of our son's experience has opened me to learn more about Daddy Yankee, his passion for making the world a better place, and building up people rather than tearing them down. Having Jesus as our friend, we are drawn to become friends with all who work to make the world sing in tune with God's design of justice and love.

On this day of the Reformation, because God is so open to us even while our lives are so far from God's intention, we have a calling to be open to others whose lives may seem far from ours. In Jesus, we do not just get by with a little help. In Jesus, we become more than conquerors over sin, death and the power of the devil. With an intensely personal and loving God, our old lives are put to death and a new life is born, and we have a friend who is also our Savior. This is good news we cannot keep to ourselves. It is news that has the power to take hold of us and free us to serve, and in that serving to find healing and forgiveness, again and again, for others and for us. *For we hold that a person is put right with God by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Roman 3:28*