

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT  
Mark Gravrock  
26 October 2014  
Reformation  
Jeremiah 31.31-34, Romans 3.19-31, John 8.31-36

Grace and peace . . .

Living here in the valley, we are captivated by Glacier Park.

In know, that's a real surprise!

We're not exactly the only ones who feel that way.

While we lived in the Seattle area,

it was Mt Rainier that drew us and held us.

Years ago, we had people visiting from back east

who had never seen the Mountain.

They were visiting at the very best time of year for seeing Rainier –

end of July, beginning of August.

They were with us for 10 days –

should have had plenty of opportunity to see it –

and the Mountain never showed its face –

covered with clouds all the time.

We took them to Mt Rainier, up to Paradise

above 5000 feet in alpine country.

Still – no mountain!

By now they were joking about how the whole thing was a hoax,

and all the postcards just had the mountain painted on them.

Then finally, just before it was time for us to leave and drive home,

the clouds parted just a tiny bit,

and one little piece of the upper slope of Mt Rainier appeared –

way up there!

And then the clouds closed back in – and the Mountain was gone.

But now our guests had seen it with their own eyes!

They were believers!

And they wanted more!

(But they didn't get any more.)

This is Reformation Sunday.

This is the day, every fall,

when we celebrate the amazing events of nearly 500 years ago.  
We celebrate the moment when Martin Luther glimpsed the Mountain,  
and told the rest of the world.

It was there all along –

the Mountain, the gospel, the amazing good news of Jesus –  
it was there all along, right there in plain sight:

While Martin was still in the monastery,  
his confessor saw the Mountain clearly,  
and tried so hard to help Martin see it.

It was there all along, right there in plain sight,  
but for most of Luther's generation the clouds were covering it over.

And then, by the Holy Spirit's gift, Martin saw.

He saw, and then he spoke, and wrote, and acted.

Reformation Day is an odd holiday.

If it's nothing more than a birthday party,

a celebration of the beginnings of the Lutheran church,  
then it's pretty in-grown and self-serving –

especially in a time when so many Christians – former enemies –  
have come together around the issues that once divided us,  
and especially in a time when denominational loyalty is very low:

We are Christians,

and many of us move from denomination to denomination very freely.

If Reformation Day is more than just a birthday party,

if it's an occasion to recall ourselves to Where We Stand,  
to remind ourselves of the central issues of our faith –  
then it's something worthwhile.

And yet, if we're not living those central issues all year long,  
then a quick dose of Reformation teaching at the end of October  
is not going to be worth much.

If Reformation Day is a good excuse to sing "A Mighty Fortress" –

and yes, we haven't sung it yet, but we will! –  
then that's something!

But here's the oddest thing about Reformation Day:

The Reformation recognized that Christ's church  
is always in need of reformation.

We are always needing the Spirit to recall us to the center.

We are *always* in need of being set free by the gospel again.  
 But if Reformation Day itself becomes an institution –  
 if it celebrates an institution –  
 then Reformation itself cries out for reformation!

Because here's the thing:

The gospel, the good news we have in Jesus –  
 so simple and clear that small children grasp it easily –  
 the gospel is elusive.

It's slippery.

It's devilishly hard for us to hang onto!

It's Mt Rainier, towering there right in front of our eyes.

We finally glimpse it, and we're awestruck and overwhelmed by grace --  
 and then the clouds cover it back up again  
 and we don't quite get it.

*And that's as true for Lutherans as it is for everybody else!*

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther captured it  
 in phrases that he learned from Romans, our second reading today.

This is it: This is the slogan:

**We are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.**

We are justified – we are made right with God –  
 not by any deeds we have done, but by grace – by God's free loving gift –  
 by faith – when we come to trust God –  
 because of Christ – because Jesus gave himself for us on the cross.

That's it. That's the gospel, the good news.

That's Mt Rainier breaking through the clouds.

But does that work for you?

Does that language work for you?

The terms are foreign to our lives:

Who talks about righteousness or justification on the street or at home?

But – truth to tell – the problem is bigger than a language problem.

The problem is a heart problem.

Let me start over.

Let's talk about Keeping Score.

We keep score.

We live in a world, a society, that keeps score, all the time.

We've been doing it since we were small children.

It's all we know.

And it destroys us.

Keeping Score destroys us.

Now certainly, there are places where Keeping Score makes sense:

If my car needs serious work – beyond the simple things I know –

I want to take it to somebody who knows what they're doing.

Good mechanics get a reputation in the community,

and I'm gonna ask around.

Shoddy mechanics also get a reputation.

We keep score, and keeping score is a very helpful thing!

If someone in my family needs surgery,

I want a surgeon with a great score!

There are places where Keeping Score makes a lot of sense.

But there are other places, crucial places,

where Keeping Score doesn't make sense at all.

Take relationships:

Even there, there is some score-keeping:

You'd be a fool to enter into a trusting relationship

with someone who has a long record of unfaithfulness.

But *within* a relationship,

Keeping Score is not a helpful or sensible thing.

Within a relationship, Keeping Score is usually destructive.

We started Keeping Score a long time ago –

it was way back there in the Garden.

It began when we stepped *out* of relationship,

when we decided we didn't want a God,

when we decided we wanted to go it alone,

to be in charge ourselves.

That's the day when we started Keeping Score.

We began to blame each other,

to measure ourselves against each other.

We knew there's such a thing as right and wrong,  
 healthy ways to live and unhealthy ways,  
 constructive paths and destructive paths.

We soon learned that all of our ways and deeds  
 carry their own consequences.

We reap what we sow.

But how tiny a step –

from that recognition of right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy –  
 how tiny a step from that recognition to score-keeping,  
 to our beginning to measure ourselves and each other,  
 to our checking each other out (and checking ourselves out):

*Am I doing it as well as you are?*

*Am I being more faithful than you are?*

*My missteps and failings – surely they're not as bad as yours!*

In our distance from God – because we're on our own now! –

In our distance from God, we're vaguely aware

that God is right, that God is healthy,

that God's ways are constructive and life-giving,

and we look at ourselves, and – usually, anyway –

we're well aware that we don't fully measure up.

Maybe we even sense the truth

that finally, no one but God is righteous.

But then, the next obvious question is

*How good to I need to be?*

*What's a passing grade?*

*If I can't hit 100%, what percent is God looking for?*

*What's my score, and what does it need to be?*

It's a world-wide thing.

The ancient Egyptians imagined that, at death,

their hearts would be weighed on a scale,

and only if the heart was lighter than a feather

would it go on to eternal life.

In India, it was *karma*.

*Karma* determined that your deeds followed you through death,

and determined what kind of next life  
you would be born into.

Keeping Score is a world-wide thing.

Sometimes, for those of us who play the Score-keeping game well,  
sometimes we convince ourselves that our own score is really pretty high  
and other people's scores – not so much!  
And we begin to rank each other.

Keeping Score is an all-pervasive thing.

Our society is shot through with it.

And the church is just as infected.

So here's an irony:

We proclaim, as our central teaching,  
that we are made right with God not by anything we do,  
but by God's free and gracious gift  
poured out freely and lovingly on Jesus' cross  
accepting us, forgiving us, rescuing us,  
that grace made our own as we come to trust God:  
ALL GIFT, ALL FREE LOVING GIFT,  
SIGNED, SEALED, AND DELIVERED.

And then we start to tinker with it:

*Your faith in Jesus has to look precisely like this.  
Your trust in Jesus needs to be followed up by these particular improvements.  
Your faith is supposed to show up  
in this level of church attendance,  
in this level of financial giving,  
in this level of involvement in the ministries of the church,  
in this moral stance, or this political stance, or this societal action.*

**The clouds cover Mt Rainier back up,  
and we've lost sight of it.**

Or we turn it inward:

*Lord, I know you say you forgive,  
but I'm still haunted by what I did.  
How can you ever forgive me for that?  
Lord, I try and I try, but I still feel like such a failure.*

*Lord, I look around the church, and I see all of Them:  
 They have it all put together.  
 What must they think of me?  
 Lord Jesus, I know you died for me.  
 Here: I promise to do X or Y or Z,  
 and then maybe I'll deserve your love.*

**The clouds cover the Mountain back up,  
 and we lose sight of it.**

Even in some of the ways we talk about Jesus' cross,  
 we run it through the Score-keeping lens:  
 We might say:  
*God demands a perfect score,  
 and only Jesus could pull that off for us.*

Or:  
*The debt we owe to God had to be paid,  
 and we couldn't pay it,  
 so Jesus paid it for us.*

There's half-truth in that language, but it leaves us trapped in Score-Keeping:

**The clouds cover the Mountain back up,  
 and we lose sight of it.**

[By contrast, here's the delightful way Paul talks about the cross in Colossians:  
*God made us alive with Jesus.  
 He forgave us all our violations.  
 He cancelled the record of debt that stood against us:  
 He nailed it to the cross.<sup>1</sup>*

At the cross, God cancelled the debt-record:  
 God erased the scoreboard, and tore it down!]

Why is the gospel so slippery?  
 Why is it so hard for us to hang onto?  
 Why is it, that we can hear it and believe it,  
 and in the next moment slip back into Keeping Score  
 with God and each other?

That rebel inside us,

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 2.13-14.

that self that so dearly insisted on going off on its own,  
doesn't give us very easily.

It doesn't let go.

And so we hear God's word of utter, astounding grace,  
and our rebel self tries to stuff it back into its own Score-keeping grid.

For the record, we do the same thing with all our relationships,  
turning the gift of love back into some sort of bargain.

That's how we mess up the gift of relationship!

God knows our struggle.

God knows what we're up against.

Long before Jesus came, God gave a message to one of the prophets:

*I'm going to do a new thing, God said.*

*I'm going to carve a new kind of relationship with you.*

*The relationship I first established with you, my people,  
you turned it into Score-keeping,*

*and then you turned your back on it – and no wonder!<sup>2</sup>*

*So here's what I'm going to do:*

*I'm going to take my love and plant it inside you.*

*I'm going to take my design for life and health,  
and give you a new heart and a new will.*

*Never again will there be any score-keeping:*

*My wholeness will be written inside you.*

*You will be mine, and I will be yours – and there will be no keeping of score.<sup>3</sup>*

*You will know me – all of you --*

*not through the cloud of some scoreboard*

*but in the crystal-clear demonstration of my love.*

*I will forget your violations.*

*I will forgive your wrong.*

*There will be no score – only restoring love.<sup>4</sup>*

If you've been in Glacier Park, you know.

[Though I suppose there are people

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 31.31-32

<sup>3</sup> V. 33

<sup>4</sup> V. 34

who go through the park and never see it.]  
 If you've been in Glacier Park, you know.  
 And, if you're like me, every time you return to the park,  
 it's a new surprise, and you're amazed all over again.  
 The clouds finally clear off Mt Rainier, and you see!  
 And the sight changes you:  
 Every time you see it, it changes you.

That's why we're here:

Day after day, the clouds sock back in – the clouds of Score-keeping –  
 and we lose sight of the crystal-clarity of grace.

That's why we're here:

We come back, Sunday after Sunday,  
 so that the Holy Spirit can blow off the clouds again  
 and gospel us again  
 and show us Jesus' truth again.

Jesus tells us,

**If you continue in my word,  
 you are truly my disciples;  
 and you will know the truth,  
 and the truth will set you free.<sup>5</sup>**

That's why we're here:

We're here to have God write gospel on our hearts,  
 over and over again.

So, people of God, hear the gospel:

There is no more keeping of score.

[The only score-keeping left is of our own doing,  
 when we refuse to hear of God's gift,  
 when we want nothing to do with it,  
 and are left with nothing but our own score.]

For our God, there is no more keeping of score.

Jesus went to the cross to erase the scoreboard,  
 and tear it down.

Your score is gone.

Your neighbor's score is gone.

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<sup>5</sup> John 8.31-32

God has forgotten whatever the score was.

You are forgiven.

No more calculators.

No more tally-sheets.

No more measuring rods.

Jesus demolished them all at the cross.

Now there is only the banquet.

Trust Jesus.

He's offering his hand for the dance.

Drop your score-cards at the door,  
take Jesus' hand, and dance.

Amen