Kevin Powell
Reformation Sunday
Romans 3: 18-28

So, who was it? Who was it that told you that you weren't good enough?

Those voices ring in everyone's ears. No one is immune to them.

It begins early.

Maybe it was your brother who said that girls couldn't play hockey.

Maybe it was a classmate who called you "dumb" because you couldn't master your multiplication tables.

Maybe it was your parents who examined your straight "A" report card and asked why you didn't get an A+.

Maybe it was a boss who said that folks like you were a dime a dozen and therefore weren't worth a raise.

Maybe it was your spouse who called you "stupid" in order to feel superior.

Maybe it was a fire-breathing preacher who waved a condemning finger in your face for every little sin.

Maybe it was your God who threatened you with eternal hell-fire for having simple human weakness.

So who was it? Who was it that told you that you weren't good enough?

The father of our Lutheran faith, Martin Luther, heard a voice that told him that he wasn't good enough. That voice, he believed, was God's, as mediated through the Church. And he lived in terror of God's judgment.

The church at his time placed impossible demands on people, and those who failed to meet those demands were threatened with the fires of Hell. And Luther was earnestly faithful enough to try to meet all the obligations that were placed on him.

But he still feared for his soul.

The litany of requirements was relentless. Prayer every morning, noon, and night. Fifty laps around the rosary. Kiss the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary. Stare at some old saint's ones. Hand over your paycheques to the church to spring Uncle Hans from purgatory. And maybe – just maybe – you could fend off the wrath of the Almighty.

But Luther couldn't do it all. And if anyone had the gumption to pull all this off it was good 'ol Martin Luther.

But try as he might, he failed, again and again and again and again. And every time he fell short, he looked to the heavens and his eyes filled with terror. He worried about what God would do when he fell into God's hands.

And Luther came to the point that he lashed out saying he HATED God.

He HATED God for putting him in this position.

He HATED God for placing impossible requirements on people and then punishing them when they fail.

He HATED God for creating him a sinful human being and than threatening him with never-ending torture for being so sinful as he had been created.

How could God be just or fair or righteous - let alone loving - when God seems to delight in condemning people for not living up to unattainable standards?

So Luther wondered if there could be a God he could love, a God who would accept him, a God who would save him from himself.

And so he was directed to a foreign land, a domain where he was previously discouraged from journeying. His spiritual director, Johann von Stauptiz, took him by the hand and guided him to the scriptures.

One thing you could say about Luther was that he never did anything halfway. He immersed himself in the scriptures the same way he threw himself into racing after the church's impossible demands.

He learned ancient Greek and Hebrew. He memorized most of the bible and earned a doctorate in what would now be called Old Testament Studies.

He even read the scriptures while doing his daily business. One morning, as he closed the door to the outhouse he opened Paul's letter to the Romans and met these words:

“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” (Romans 3: 28)

Martin Luther let those words settle on his lips, absorb into his skin, and nestle into his heart.

For we hold that we are loved and forgiven by God because of our faith, and not because of anything we have done or not done.

For we hold that neither church attendance, nor bible study, nor religious requirements will bring us into a right relationship with God, but are a response to God’s love.

For we hold that neither human expectations nor society’s demands have any hold on our lives.

For we hold that insults, abusive relationships, or harsh obligations, have no power over us.

For we hold that three-car-garage houses in the ‘burbs, bloated bank accounts, and fancy degrees do not make us better than anyone else.

For we hold that neither professional accomplishments nor community achievements define us in God’s eyes.

For we hold that neither failure, nor mistakes, nor regret make up the sum of our lives.

For we hold that all that matters to God is our faith. And even our faith is not our own. Our faith is a gift. Our faith has been given to us free of charge. There was nothing we could do to earn it ourselves.

Martin dropped his book, finished what he was doing, and began the work of telling everyone about this magnificent truth that had been hiding in plain sight.

And we know that not everyone wanted to hear that message. The religious authorities went ballistic when they heard what Luther had to say. Because it’s easier to live under a comfortable judgment than to figure out how to live in the chaos of freedom and forgiveness.

It’s easier to be told what to do rather than live out our salvation in joy and awe.

It's easier to put up fences around religious life, enforcing rules and regulations rather than trusting that the Holy Spirit inspires us to grow in new and exciting directions.

It's easier to try to control others, to tell people how to think and how to live, rather than to trust that the bible can move them to deeper discipleship.

It's easier to point out peoples' faults rather than to celebrate their gifts.

It's easier to condemn others for their moral failings rather than to believe that God is at work in them.

It's easier to worry about the church's future, than trust that God hasn't given up on us quite yet.

It's easier to despair of the evil of this world rather than to look for hopeful signs of the kingdom of God that are blooming all around us.

I know how easy all this is because I see myself in its foul simplicity. Rules and regulations and control may be our human way, but their not God's way. God always takes the harder, but more life-giving way, the way in which God asks us to travel.

God asks that we live by faith. And faith means letting go of the need to control; the need to control our lives and the need to control the lives of others. And that's not easy for us to give up that control.

Faith means trusting that God is still in the business of making all things new, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Faith means seeing new life being born everyday, even while the evening news warns us of a world in political chaos.

Faith means believing the Holy Spirit is working among our young people, growing them into disciples of Jesus, becoming the leaders of their generation; instead of worrying about how many show up for youth group.

Faith is daring to believe that God has an exciting future for the Church, even while our numbers seem to be shrinking.

Faith trusts that the power of God's Living Word of scripture is working within each one of us, transforming us from the inside out, rather than demanding childish adherence to the written words of the bible.

Faith means waking up everyday and seeing new and fresh opportunities to participate in God's mission of re-creating, building on this world.

Faith means knowing that even though your past may be stained by grief, marked by regret, and littered with broken relationships or failed dreams, you know that - by faith - God's future for you is better than your painful past.

Faith trusts that there's nothing you can do to make God love you more than God already does. And there's nothing you can do to make God stop loving you.

Faith hopes that when your eyes close in death, they will open again in the fullness of God's presence.

See, I told you faith was hard. That's why faith is something we've been given, and not something we can create on our own. That's why faith is a gift.

And when you receive that gift of faith in Holy Baptism, it is now God that trusts that you will know what to do with it. God trusts that you will be a people of faith, a people of joy, a people of love, a people of mercy and forgiveness, a people of unity and of peace.

You may not always get it right, but you are forgiven when you fail, and you are put back on God's path, so that you can use your moments and your days to be good news people in an often bad news world.

You have been chosen to live this good news life.
You have been picked from the crowded universe, called by name, cleansed in the waters of baptism, and given a job to do.

You have been mandated by the Almighty to shine with the brilliance of God's love.

You have been conscripted into joining the company of heaven that offers God's hand of mercy and peace to a world that so desperately needs it.

You are a child of the king, called to lead the world into God's future of love and forgiveness.

So, who was it? Who was it that told you that you weren't good enough? It certainly wasn't God. As loud as those voices are, it is God's still, small voice that tells you the truth about who you are.

The truth that you are loved. The truth that you are beautiful and precious and rare. The truth that all the rules and regulations in the world won't measure up to the love that God has for you and for everything God has made.

The truth that Martin Luther reminds us of; the truth that we celebrate today, and a truth out of which we live our lives as followers of Jesus: the truth that says "that we are justified by faith and not by works prescribed by the law."

May this be so among us. Amen.