

Last Monday before I left for work, my mom asked me what I wanted her to tackle in the wide world of unpacking. I told her the thing that would be most helpful would be for her to unload the zillions of kitchen boxes that were strewn across my apartment. I said if she could just get my pots and pans and dishes put away that would be an immense help. She then said something about how she would have to wash them first, to which I said, umm, I washed them, I didn't pack dirty dishes. And she just looked at me and said, "I'm old school," indicating that she needed to wash everything that was getting unpacked.

Let me tell you...I got home, and I didn't recognize my canister set. My mom decided it wasn't enough to just wash my dishes, she washed *everything*. My canisters were gleaming. I didn't even know you could take the little rubber suction portion off of their lids! Her pride and joy was one of my cutting boards that had born the brunt of years of watermelon and carrots and any number of things. To me, it looked as clean as it was going to get. Not to my mom, that thing got a new lease on life. I swear there's like a cleaning gene that unlocks in my mom when she's doing something for one of us, it's like she becomes magic and things that you never imagined looking how they do, suddenly become new again. My mom is the master of a cleaning clean slate. In her hands, everything becomes like new

again, and I have zero idea how she does it. I could attempt to clean these things and they will come out spotty and clean enough but not gleaming. My mom could just look at them and you could see yourself in them. Call it magic, call it being a mom, call it a mystery, all I know was that my kitchen was given a so fresh and so clean start. One that it would not have gotten without my mom's scrubbing bubbles.

Today brings with it multiple reminders of God's own clean slate techniques. Ones that span across millennia, touching generation upon generation of God's people with one simple promise: you can start over, you can start fresh, you can be wiped clean. It begins in Jeremiah. To a people who have long been wasting away in exile, afraid that their relationship with God will never be the same, God's word of promise comes. For so long the people and God have been operating under an old covenant, one that the people broke over and over and over again, never quite grasping that God *meant* it when God asked them to care for one another and work towards justice and righteousness not their own selfish aims. So now, God decides on a new tactic, a new covenant. This one will be innate within them, written upon their hearts, an indelible part of their very being. They won't be able to forget it, because it will be a part of them. Written within them will be a deep, intimate knowledge of God and their relationship with God,

but in order for this new covenant to be sealed, everything that came before has to be wiped clean. All of the fingerprints of exile, all of the bumps and dents of what has come before has to be washed away, and God tells the people that is exactly what is going to happen. God not only tells them that their sins, their iniquity is forgiven, but it is *forgotten*. It's like that sci-fi tool used in the *Men in Black* movies where you flash it at someone and they forget everything that came before. God does that, sins obliterated. It is time for a fresh start, a new covenant, a new path forward.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years and we discover that even with this heart-written covenant, people are going to be people and there is going to be sin and brokenness wherever they go. As someone well acquainted with said sin and brokenness in his own life, Paul has a revelation. None of this is about him. The work he is called to do, the faith that beats within his heart, it's all a response, a gift, all in reaction to the overwhelming power of Christ's death on the cross *for him*. God's grace is sufficient for him, and he realizes that in Christ we have a new Passover, a new covenant, the ultimate fresh start, the sins previously committed have been passed over and behold everything has become new. Christ died so that *all* of God's children might experience that clean slate, that new beginning, that sigh of relief that says I can start over.

Fast forward another 1,500 years and once again people are peopling and the whole church needs a clean slate. This free gift of God's grace has turned into a commodity to be used to build bigger and better buildings, to line the pockets of those in power, and keep the poor and marginalized in the corners they have been relegated too. And so these ancient words of Jeremiah, of Paul are given new life. The church is given a reminder that there is nothing, *nothing*, not a thing that we can do to earn our way into heaven. It doesn't take money, it doesn't take a piece of paper, it doesn't even take works; all it took was Christ going to the cross and asking God to forgive all of us. It doesn't mean stop striving for the kingdom, stop seeking to do justice, but it does mean doing those things from the covenant written on your heart, not from some panicked notion that if you don't do enough you'll be locked out of the pearly gates permanently. Martin Luther declared a clean slate with just a piece of parchment and a few sets of nails, and once again, as we come here today, we need a reminder of that fresh start, that need to be washed clean, and given the chance to start anew.

Reformation Sunday comes with a two fold reminder and the first of those reminders is all about the gift this clean slate is. In God's eyes, you are perfect, sure, you are messy and broken and you're going to get some things wrong, but you are perfectly and wonderfully made. All that baggage

that you feel clinging to your shoulders, tightening in knots in your lower back, sitting like a migraine at the front of your skull, God erases it. God says over and over and over again, you are made new, you are washed clean, you can start fresh. You are forgiven, wholly and completely. You are beloved, wholly and completely. You are a child of God whose place is assured, who doesn't need to fight and scrap their way to salvation, but who can rest peacefully knowing God loves you and you're taken care of.

But of course, we are Lutherans and we love a both/and, a gray area, and that's where the second reminder comes in. The clean slate can't be an excuse to just not change, to keep repeating the same patterns, and doing the same things over and over again, because ya know God will be there with the big wand of grace and say it's ok. The covenant that has been placed within our hearts is one that calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to care for the lost, the lonely, and forgotten, to speak up and out for justice, to be an instrument of God's grace in the world, fighting for our siblings who are marginalized and oppressed. Just because God has assured our salvation and said no amount of work is going to achieve it, does not mean we get to ignore the very real calling that has been placed upon our hearts to actually still *do the work* of the kingdom. This fresh start we've been given isn't just for us, to selfishly hoard and use for however we see fit; it's a clean start to

say how can we be better on behalf of our neighbors, how can we do this differently, how can we make God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven? So often we think that since there's grace, since there's forgiveness, it just gives us a free pass, but I think Luther would have some new theses about that if that's how we chose to live. The grace of God frees us up to do the work, the very real kingdom work that is so desperately needed in this world.

And it isn't just us individually that need this reminder, the church needs this reminder. In these post-Covid years, churches have been sitting in a panic spiral, hunkering in worried about dwindling numbers and diminishing bank accounts, and so they've curled into themselves as opposed to looking out into God's world. We've turned discipleship into a fight for survival, as opposed to a call for how we can help our neighbors thrive in a world that is complicated and messy. Luther said that the church must always be reforming, and there is no time like the present to say, we need a clean slate, we need a fresh start. Do we want to be a people so worried about surviving that we insult ourselves from the world and forget that our neighbors, God's kingdom exists *outside* of our walls where the real work needs to be done? Do we want to be people who hoard God's grace and say it's only for those who look, think, and live like we do? Or do we

want to say this fresh start is a chance for us to break open our doors, go out to our neighbors and do some kingdom work? Do we want this clean slate to be an opportunity for us to exercise radical welcome that says at this table, beneath this cross we are all God's children who are fearfully and wonderfully made, so come one, come all to the hungry feast?

There can be no denying our hearts and the very church itself are full of dents and dings and smudges. And there is a part of us that is probably inclined to shine it up with our shirt sleeve, shrug our shoulders and say, eh good enough to get the job done. Yet, we are a church that has always been in the business of doing the new and radical thing, of getting out the elbow grease and the scrubbing bubbles and saying today we're going to get this thing shiny and new and do something with it. Today your heart is washed clean, the church is made new, and God's kingdom is calling, but will we respond?

There is no time like the present for a new Reformation, for ourselves and for our church. The world needs a message of grace now more than ever, not one to be hoarded and used as a weapon, but one that is freely given and used as an instrument of overwhelming love. Now more than ever is the time for us to dare to pick up a scrub brush and declare that we are children of a God who will make all things sparkly and new. **AMEN!!!**