

“Where Do We Stand?” (2 Kings 22:3-23:3) Reformation Sunday, 10/25/09

A while back, I heard a report about someone vandalizing a Lutheran Church. In particular, a beautiful stained glass window was broken – one depicting the three key principles of the Reformation: “Grace alone,” “Faith alone,” and “Scripture alone.” Now, “Grace alone” and “Faith alone” were hardly damaged, but “Scripture alone” was shattered. Trying to be funny, the reporter said, “Well, two out of three isn’t bad.”

I disagree. I hope we all do. These three principles together are the tripod on which our Lutheran beliefs are based. With just two legs, the tripod cannot stand. And this isn’t just an analogy. This is concrete fact. Up until now, everything we Lutherans believe has been based on Scripture alone. That includes what we believe about “Grace alone” and “Faith alone” – what we believe about God doing everything necessary for our salvation; what we believe about God offering us salvation as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ. And really, we have no choice but to base our beliefs on Scripture alone. There is no Lutheran pope. There is no Lutheran Council of the Twelve. All we have to go on is Scripture – which is fine; all we *need* is Scripture. But if that principle gets shattered, we’re in trouble. We may wobble along okay for a while, thinking we’re being faithful – but how will we know that for sure? We won’t. We can’t. Without Scripture as our chart and compass, we could be spiritually adrift and not even realize it. That has happened before. It can happen again.

For a good example of how it’s happened before, think back to King Josiah in our text. His grandfather, Manassah, and his father, Amon, were hands down the ungodliest kings in Jewish history. Altogether, their reigns lasted 57 years, and between the two of them, they did everything they could to replace faith in God with faith in idols. Not only did they fill God’s temple with idols, practicing the foulest rituals imaginable, but they did all they could to get rid of God’s Word – and to a large extent, they succeeded. When Josiah became king, worshipping idols seemed normal to him. So far as he knew, this had always been their religion. But as Josiah grew up, that changed. Someone must have taught him about the faith of his ancestors – faith in one God, the Lord – for early in his reign, Josiah tried to restore the worship of God, and eighteen years into his reign he began repairing the temple. At that point, he probably thought he was doing quite well in the faith department. But as they repaired the temple, someone discovered the long lost Book of the Law – God’s Word. It was brought to the king and read to him. As Josiah listened and listened, he was horrified. How far his people had strayed – how far he himself had strayed – from what God actually said, actually promised, actually commanded! And there was no getting around it. It was all right there in God’s Word.

So what did Josiah do? Did he ignore God’s Word? No. Did he pick and choose the parts he liked? No. Did he rationalize it away? No. Did he even take his time responding? No. Fortunately for him and his people, Josiah

listened and responded immediately – as you would expect a man of God to do! Immediately, Josiah repented -- symbolized by the tearing of his clothes. Then immediately Josiah sought understanding – with guidance from the prophetess, Huldah. Then immediately Josiah obeyed God's Word – obeyed it wholly, completely, unconditionally. Thus began *Josiah's* Reformation. Now, this cannot have been a popular move – not with everyone. After 75 years of idolatry, 75 years of state-sponsored immorality, no doubt some opposed him with a vengeance. But that didn't stop Josiah. No matter how difficult, how unpopular, his reforms might be, he didn't let that stop him. To him, if God said it, that settled it. Josiah chose to stand on God's Word.

He, of course, was only one of many figures in the Bible who set this example for us. Faced with misbelief, unbelief, immorality, or all three, they ignored popular opinion, ignored what seemed pragmatic, and they took their stand on God's Word. Today we honor Martin Luther, but he followed in the footsteps of countless men and women who, in their own way, had said in their own time, "*My conscience is captive to the Word of God...*" Today we honor the other reformers as well, but they, too, came from a long line of witnesses who put God's Word ahead of safety or personal advantage and said, "*Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.*" Truth be told, there has never been a time when such faithfulness has not been needed. There has never been a time when such faithfulness has not been hard. Human nature being what it is, people have always tried to get around God's Word. People have always asked, "**Did God really say...?**" People have always preferred to believe what they preferred to be true. And people always will. From age to age, the specific issues may vary, but the waywardness of the human heart remains a constant. So for people of faith, the question always comes down to this: *Is God's Word our authority or not? Will we trust God's Word or not? And when push comes to shove, will we defend God's Word or not? Where do we stand?*

Today, the specific issues before this congregation are clear. I hope the way to decide them is equally clear. For even if the issue were one thing today, another thing tomorrow, and still another thing the day after that, we would still need to be clear on what will be our authority. And what will be our authority? Will it be public opinion, personal connections, peripheral issues, pure pragmatism? Will it be preferring to believe what we prefer to be true? Or...will we base our decision on Scripture – Scripture alone? *Where do we stand?*

I have to tell you, one of the most painful things about this ELCA controversy has been seeing such indifference to Scripture among those who defend the decisions of the Churchwide Assembly. Some may quote a verse here or there – about "love" perhaps. Some use the old dodge about there being too many ways to interpret the Bible to be sure what it says. And some are honest enough to admit they don't care what Scripture says; they just don't agree. But again and again, such indifference to Scripture – as if the Bible were just another book, just another opinion, not God's inspired Word! And this among Lutherans!

So let there be no mistake. If we give up Scriptural authority, we give up being Lutheran. That's not to say we aren't still Christians. But if we give up Scriptural authority, we do give up being Lutheran. It really is that simple. Yes, there is more to being Lutheran than abiding by Scripture alone. There are distinctive interpretations of Scripture. And yes, within our confessional boundaries there can be differences of opinion on Scripture. In fact, that's healthy. But Scripture must still be our authority – Scripture alone. We Lutherans cannot settle for less. We cannot settle for ignoring Scripture, picking and choosing Scripture, or rationalizing away Scripture. None of that. Luther said, *"My conscience is captive to the Word of God."* Captive to the Word of God! If ours are not, we've lost something crucial.

And if our consciences are captive to the Word of God, what then? *Then* let's have the courage of our convictions! Not "agreeing to disagree" where God's Word is at stake. Not excusing one kind of sin because we've been lax about another kind. And for heaven's sake, not dragging our feet! If Scripture were unclear, that would be one thing. But when it comes to human sexuality, Scripture is very clear. The relationship God intends, that God blesses, that God joins together, is a covenant relationship between man and woman, which we call marriage. As for any other options, Scripture says, "No." It does not say, *"Well, if you think you know better, go ahead and change the rules."* Nor does it say, *"If a majority votes to recognize other options, that will make it okay."* Nor does it say, *"And while you're at it, go ahead and lift up what God has called 'sin' as a worthy model for Christian leadership."* It says nothing of the kind! Or did I miss those verses? No, in this case, Scripture is clear! And when Scripture is clear, what's the point of waiting to make a decision? How is that faithful? How is that obedient? How is that a positive witness? As Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and saw his people worshipping the Golden Calf, can you imagine him saying, *"Well, let's give it a year to see how we feel about this?"* Or as Joshua spoke to the tribes of Israel, can you imagine him saying, *"Choose...sometime this year...whom you will serve?"* Dragging our feet will not make the issue go away. It will not preserve unity. It will not make us more secure. If anything, it will make us spiritually vulnerable. We've already seen that. So for our own sake and for the sake of our witness, we need to have the courage of our convictions. *Where do we stand?*

To be sure, this won't be a popular stand. Locally, some are already taking shots at us for rejecting the ELCA's new positions. Why, just the other day, somebody said to one of our members, *"Oh, you go to that radical church."* I had to laugh. That had to be the first time in history RLC was ever called "radical." But you know what? If you remember where the word comes from – in Latin, "radical" means *"going right down to the roots"* – being called "radical" is really a compliment. I'd consider it a badge of honor! What other kind of church would we want to be than one that is radically rooted in God and His Word? I *want* to be part of a church that is radically faithful! I want to be part of a church that is radically obedient! I want to part of a church that is radically committed to Jesus

Christ, and radically committed to reaching out in His name to *“help people build strong, effective Christian lives with the resources of God’s grace.”* I hope I am part of such a radical church! I hope we all are!

...Which is really the point today, isn’t it? Week after week, we hear biblical stories about people standing up for their faith and defending godly values. Today, we will have the chance to live out such a story ourselves. And let’s be clear what is at stake. Not faithfulness to a denomination. Not faithfulness to our friends. Not faithfulness to public opinion. What’s at stake is faithfulness to God – faithfulness to what God teaches us in His own inspired Word. Do we believe it or not? Is it our authority or not? Will we hold onto the principle of Scripture Alone, or *will* two out of three be good enough? *Where do we stand?* Amen.