



**Skin in the Game**  
**Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 31, 2021)**

It's Reformation Sunday, where as a church we give thanks for the reform movement started by Martin Luther and others in the 16th century. One of the many themes that pops up at this time each year is freedom, often connected to these words in John: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." But, what are we set free from? What are we set free for?

We are **freed from the sin of separation** from God and God's good creation **for the purpose of acknowledging and honoring our Creator God**. Every creature, every element of the universe carries the divine imprint: beauty, purpose, love, creativity, and so on. Every creature is capable of revealing something of God to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Psalm 104:1.5.14-17.19-24.27.31.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!  
O Lord my God, You are great indeed.

You established the earth upon its foundations,  
So that it will never be moved.

Yahweh causes the grass to grow for the cattle,  
And vegetation for the labor of man,  
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,  
And wine which makes man's heart glad,  
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,  
And food which sustains man's heart.

The trees of the Lord drink their fill,  
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,  
Where the birds build their nests,  
And the stork, whose home is the fir trees.

He made the moon for the seasons;  
The sun knows the place of its setting.  
You appoint darkness and it becomes night,  
In which all the beasts of the forest prowl about.  
The young lions roar after their prey  
And seek their food from God.  
When the sun rises they withdraw  
And lie down in their dens.

Man goes forth to his work  
And to his labor until evening.

O Lord, how many are Your works!  
In wisdom You have made them all;  
The earth is full of Your possessions.

They all wait for You  
To give them their food in due season.

I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul.  
Praise the Lord!

Everyone of us is child of God whom God loves and cares for. We are not alone in the universe.

**1<sup>st</sup> Article of the Apostles' Creed:** I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

**M. Luther's explanation:** What is this? What does it mean?

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

If God is the Creator, then **all that we are and have comes from God**. That's easy to affirm with our words but do we truly believe it with our heart? Isn't what we say that what we have is "ours"? We have worked for it. How can it be God's?

We have created **protective boundaries** around our stuff and our personal bank accounts are clearly distinct and separated from one another. My credit score is not your credit score and vice-versa. Our cultural "theology" is grounded in private property and ownership.

Yet, the creative activity of the Word spoken to the ancestors and recorded in the Bible gives witness to the **creative activity of the Word of God in creation**: the Word witnesses to the Word. Hear what Ps 33:6,20-22 has to say:

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.*

*Our soul waits for the Lord;  
he is our help and shield.*

*Our heart is glad in him,*

*because we trust in his holy name.  
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.*

The Word of God created all that is seen and unseen, the same Word that created me, my heart, my faculties, and wants to dwell in me. How does that Word dwelling in me give witness to the Word active in creation?

For me to know, I need to observe that Word, listen to It, ponder It, become familiar with It, let It rest in my heart, bring wisdom to my thoughts, awe to my soul, strength to my spine, truth to my speech, and love to my actions.

**God is not done with me yet.** God is forgiving and forward-looking, more patient with me than I can be. I'm both saint and sinner. God's Spirit is still giving me shape. The best of me is ahead of me. When I look at myself, it's easy to focus on what I don't like, my mistakes and flaws, my lack of generosity and sensibility, my fears and hardness of heart. But God is strong enough to love me not in spite of my sins but because of them. God is not confused by the smudges on my soul and the pollution of my heart. When God looks at me, God continues to affirm the goodness of God's creation. We are God's ongoing project.

In God's infinite wisdom, **God is not done with creation, either.** God has chosen to continue God's creation through all of us; we are called to care for God's creation: this body, this mind, this soul, and all the rest of creation in which we are immersed and with which we are interconnected. As a splendid conductor, God calls all creation to harmonize and sing praises to our Creator God. That gives glory to God, and that which is in dissonance needs to be reconciled into a choral harmony to manifest the Beauty and Wisdom of God.

**Beloved Child of God:** The second purpose of freeing us from the sin of separation from God and God's creation is to enjoy an intimate relationship with God "in Christ."<sup>1</sup> Every child of God has the opportunity to enjoy an intimate relationship with God. We do not only belong and are loved by God; we are also called closer to God's heart. Each of us is called by name and affirmed a "beloved" child of God in whom God is well pleased. Not just a good creation but also and above all a pleasant creation. Our spiritual job is to grow in our understanding of the beauty of that relationship. In God we discover our being and identity. Discipleship is a closer walk with God.

When I think of Jesus, I see him in Mary's arms as he begins his life in our midst, and then I see him again in her arms as he is brought down from the cross. He is God's child just as you and I are children of God, wanted by God, loved, nurtured, sustained, and called to enjoy God's love for each and all creatures here on earth. When God looks at you and me, God sees a perfect child, whom God loves with infinite and unconditional love.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 1:16; 2:20; Romans 13:14; Colossians 2:6-7

From the cross, Jesus speaks to Mary one last time and reveals to her his plan for the future: When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:27-28)

So, when we look at Mary holding her child, who is that baby? And when we look at Mary at the foot of the cross, who is the one she is holding? Is that indicative of where we end up if we follow Jesus? Our closeness to God requires the death of daily selfish moments for a journey of purification and identification with Jesus, the perfect Son. That is both liberation and salvation.

But we do not walk alone. The Church is also called to identify with the Body of Christ. Because we become Jesus' hands, feet and mouth, we minister to the world God loves. We exist to give God the glory. Our ministries are an expression of God's care for the world. We rejoice in the opportunity to bring calm, understanding, reconciliation, and peace not counting the cost but appreciating the opportunity. Whether God sends us out two by two or in groups, we witness to God's love for the world. Our ministries are an expression of that love. Today, I want to lift up two ministries:

- a. Prayer shawl ministry
- b. Visiting ministry

May God bless Nativity Lutheran Church, a church of the ELCA, but more than that, disciples of Christ grateful for the call to serve. Amen.