

*A Word Come to Us*

Reformation Sunday  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

October 29, 2006  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46  
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A writer for the Harrisburg Patriot-News, Colin McEvoy, offers a weekly column called "What's What on the Web," where he lists quirky web sites that are generating interest. In last Monday's paper he mentioned a web site called PostSecret. This is a blog where, if a secret has been burdening you, you can post that secret anonymously by sending it via postcard or photo message. Then PostSecret publishes it on the web. There is even a book entitled *My Secret* soon to come out, and it will contain many of these postings.

Now that the Easton family has recently left behind dial-up Internet service, and has joined the ranks of those using DSL for their Internet, thus allowing me to go on-line so much faster and without tying up the phone line, I checked out PostSecret on Monday. Some of the secrets were humorous, and not really "bad," like the woman who goes around grocery stores routinely shaking up cans of fizzy soda. Another person admits to dropping pennies on the ground just to give pleasure to others who will pick them up. But some of the secrets describe more dangerous or sinister actions. For example, there's the administrative assistant who likes to delete some of her supervisor's important voice-mails. Or the person who sent in a picture of a snarling dog and wrote, "I've purchased the poison I'm going to feed to my neighbor's barking dog."

A number of the secrets posted are painful to read and contemplate. The secrets are the verbalizations of people who are truly despairing. One photo of a guy passed out on the floor has written across it: "I'm finding it harder and harder . . . to convince people that it's just partying and not a problem." Or the photo of the woman holding up a sign that reads: "My doctor told me I might have cancer. My health insurance won't cover the test I need to confirm this for another two months. I have never been more scared in my entire life, but I am trying to put on a brave face for everyone. Do I look brave to you?"

And then there was this posting, which I can scarcely get out of my mind: "As an obnoxious 9 year old, I put a spider in my sister's bed. I thought it would be funny to watch her freak out. It turned out to be a Hobo Spider. It bit her and she ended up losing part of her leg. 12 years later and she still doesn't know I put it in her bed. The guilt is killing me."

I began to wonder what relief there was in posting those secrets. Oh, I suppose there is some sense that you unburden yourself by getting something off your chest. But is that enough? Is it enough to send your secret, your guilt, your shame, your sin, or your hurt into cyberspace anonymously, for the world to read and digest? Thousands of people view the site, read your secret, comment on it to their friends, preach about it in their sermons, and

cannot in return say a word to **you** that will speak forgiveness, that will offer comfort, that will inspire hope and courage. No. You simply tell your story into thin air. And nothing comes back to you.

PostSecret isn't enough. For when we pour out our guilt, or acknowledge our wrongdoing, or express our feelings of hurt and despair in such a fashion, **and receive nothing back**, then the guilt sticks around, the sin goes unforgiven, the wound won't heal, and the despair cannot be transformed into hope.

But I believe that Martin Luther's insights 500 years ago—insights given to him by the Holy Spirit as he translated and read scripture—can help us today. His insights were a discovery of how God's powerful word always comes to us from outside us to change us. And, in fact, that's the only way to change us and the story line of our lives. Luther studied Paul's Letter to the Romans (a portion of which is our second lesson today), and it was like a bolt of lightning struck him. Luther suddenly knew that it was the person of Jesus, in all his goodness, in his life and death and resurrection, who **was** this external word. **He still is.** Jesus Christ is God's living word come to us today, and when we encounter him, we receive from him what God knows we need today. And boy, are we ever needy! What secrets might we post? We need healing and forgiveness. We need to know we are loved and cherished. We need assurance there is a future for us, and we have reason to hope. We need to know we are not alone in this world, but that rather, God is still, as the Psalmist writes, our refuge and our strength, always present to help us in times of trouble.

For Luther, it was that study of scripture, the study of the written word, again, a word external to Luther, which brought about his encounter with the Word of God which is Jesus Christ. This encounter with his Lord and Savior changed Luther, assured him he was forgiven, and gave him hope. That is Luther's legacy for you and me, 500 years later.

Oh, and in case we forget, Jesus reminds us. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says *"If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* Think about that for a moment—if this **word** Jesus is talking about is Jesus himself, then Jesus must mean we are somehow to continue in **him**. Dwell in **him**. Welcome and receive **him**. Trust and follow **him**. So, it is **this** place, not a blog on the Internet, where we come to post our secrets—the hurts and brokenness in our lives. We come here and confess and pray and praise, placing all that we are at the foot of the cross, assured we'll receive something back. And not just something, but **everything**—the slate wiped clean, the Spirit poured out, love generously bestowed, life with God everlasting.

It pains me that I cannot speak that external word of grace and love to the people who used PostSecret for their confessions. I rejoice that I can, however, speak that external word of grace and love to you. And you can do so for me. That, my friends, is the wonder of living in a community of faith formed around Jesus Christ, who keeps on coming to us as that Word we all so desperately need. **Thanks be to God. AMEN.**

Copyright © 2006, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.