

CELEBRATE YOUR FREEDOM

Our text for Reformation Sunday is the Gospel Lesson. From Romans chapter 3 we listen to verse 22:

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow-heirs of the Lutheran Reformation,

Despite the fact that you just finished singing a hymn from Christian Worship, a LUTHERAN Hymnal, despite the fact that this is Grace LUTHERAN Church, a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical LUTHERAN Synod, this may be one of the only sermons all year in which you hear the name Martin Luther mentioned. Now you would think, wouldn't you, that a person who gives his last name to a church body, a person whose last name is incorporated into the legal title of each congregation, you would think that person would be talked about all the time, maybe most Sundays of the year. But as I said, this may be one of the only sermons all year in which you hear the name Martin Luther mentioned.

And here's the reason. Even though our hymnals and our congregation and our national church body bear the name of the great reformer, our church is not founded on Luther. Our church is founded on Christ Jesus and we are guided by God's Word alone. So why the name Lutheran? Well, according to scholars, the name Lutheran originated as a derogatory term used against Martin Luther by the German Scholastic theologian Dr. Johann Maier von Eck during the Leipzig Debate in July, 1519. (Espín, Orlando O. and Nickoloff, James B. *An introductory dictionary of theology and religious studies*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, p. 796). Eck and other Roman Catholic theologians followed the traditional practice of naming a heresy after its leader, thus labeling all who identified with the theology of Martin Luther as Lutherans. Back in the 16th century, if you called someone a Lutheran, you were labeling him or her a rebel, a protester, a heretic. Although the term "Lutheran" was originally a derogatory term, an insult, the name stuck. It was adopted by the main branch of the Protestant Movement and now, in the year 2015, more than 70 million Christians worldwide bear the name Lutheran.

Today, on the basis of Romans chapter 3 we are going to see why we, as Lutheran Christians, Celebrate Our Freedom. The story takes us back 498 years to the year 1517. On October 31, 1517, Professor Martin Luther walked down the main street of Wittenberg in Saxony, Germany from the university where he taught, to the Schlosskirche, the Castle Church. He had a large document in his hand which he posted right on the door of the church. This document contained 95 statements or theses which Luther was ready to debate with any responsible individual. In fact, Luther was looking for a scholarly discussion of these statements.

The posting of these 95 Theses was prompted by a problem which Luther saw in his church. A Dominican monk named John Tetzel was selling “indulgences,” certificates which, when purchased, supposedly removed, before God, a portion of the temporal punishment due for sins whose guilt had not been resolved through penance. Although indulgence sales were not permitted in Saxony, people were traveling to a neighboring province and buying them from Tetzel. They believed what Tetzel claimed. If they purchased these indulgences they could gain freedom from the guilt and punishment for their sins.

Freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin, that’s all these people were after, freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin. They were willing to travel, to search out this salesman, and to pay good money for freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin. And when they obtained these indulgences, they neglected prayer, they neglected confession, they neglected worship and this angered Luther. It angered him so much that he posted his 95 theses to get attention for his position. The next day, November 1, was All Saints Day and Luther knew that a large crowd of worshipers would come to the Castle Church on that day. He wanted his 95 theses to come to the attention of local scholars and perhaps promote a scholarly debate on the subject.

His plan proved to be successful, far more successful than he’d ever imagined. People began to copy the statements and have them printed using the newly invented printing press. Within two weeks the statements had spread through Germany. Within a month they were known throughout Europe. This was the first real breakthrough in the movement to correct some of the false doctrines and teachings that had developed in the church. For this reason, October 31 is celebrated as the birthday, the starting point of the Reformation.

But you know, the true story of the Reformation didn’t first begin for Luther in 1517. For Luther it began years earlier. It began with these verses of our text from Romans chapter 3. Luther was not always the stalwart figure we think of in connection with the Reformation, with hammer in hand, striking the blows heard ‘round the world and down through the centuries.

If we look at Luther during the first 30 years of his life, we see a different person altogether. We see a conscientious young man bound with the terrible chains of guilt and the compulsion to work hard to assure himself an eternal salvation. We see a man who would cringe for fear at the name of Jesus. Luther had been taught that Jesus died on the cross for sins, but that he had to do something to win the favor of Jesus in order to obtain that forgiveness. At the very least Luther was taught that he had to confess his sins to a priest, receive absolution from the priest and then perform an act of penance for a sin to be forgiven.

In his youth, Luther tried one thing after another to win God’s favor, to find peace with God, to obtain freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin. Eventually Luther went to a monastery, but there he found no peace. He tried all kinds of ways: immersing himself in his studies,

fasting, praying, physical hardships. Even when Luther earned a doctor's degree in Bible studies, he found no peace.

What Luther read in the Bible, at first, gave him no peace at all. He read, "The soul that sins is the soul that will die," and "God demands perfection." Luther couldn't meet these standards any more than you or I could. The harder he tried, the more Luther was crushed by the weight of his sin. He reached a point where he wrote:

Though I lived as a monk without fault, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was pleased with my satisfaction. I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God . . . I hated the righteous God.

Does that sound like the voice of the great reformer, a man who hated God? Is this the person to clean up the errors in the church, to put the Bible into the hands of the people . . . A God-Hater? No, of course not, not even close. But before he began THE Reformation, there was another reformation, a change, a turnaround and it occurred in the heart of Martin Luther.

As Luther was preparing to lecture on Psalm 31 he agonized over the words of the first verse:

*In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness. (Psalm 31:1 NIV).*

Deliver me in your righteousness. What did this mean? How could God deliver someone through his righteousness? Luther thought RIGHTEOUSNESS was God's hatred for sin. Then Luther turned to the writings of the Apostle Paul, especially the verses of Romans 3 which we consider today. In it, he saw at first God's stern countenance demanding complete obedience to the law.

. . . *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (Romans 3:23 NIV).

Luther knew that! This was the big fear of sinful mankind, the guilt and punishment of sin weighed heavily. Since *all have sinned*, people lived in fear of death and in fear of the judgment to come. This is the inevitable result of any doctrine that teaches people have to work for their salvation, they have to merit their salvation. The question is always there. "Have I done enough?" The realization is always there. "I don't do what God wants. I sin daily."

But the Holy Spirit caused the light to shine for Luther, and it's then and only then that the real reformation began. Yes, the Apostle Paul was saying: It's impossible for any person to stand before the judgment seat of God, to be accepted on his or her merits. The whole world stands guilty before God. There is NO righteousness from doing good works. But there is a

righteousness from God that comes to us through faith in Jesus. We are justified, that is, declared not guilty by God freely. It is the gift of God through faith in Jesus.

What irony! The very thing that John Tetzel was selling for money, the sought-after freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin, this very thing is a free and a freely-given gift of God. God credits believers with a righteousness earned by Jesus during his perfect, sinless life here on earth. That's what the Apostle Paul means when he writes:

(We) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

In his justice, our holy God hates sin and demands punishment for sin. In his love, he sent Jesus to bear our punishment for our sins with his death on the cross. In his justice, God demands perfection. In his love, God credits you with the perfection, the righteousness of Jesus. Through faith in Jesus your sins are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus you stand righteous before God. That's why the Apostle Paul can conclude:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Here was the answer Luther had been looking for. Here was the pure Gospel message that truly gladdens the heart. What did a true understanding of this do for Luther? He writes:

I began to understand that the "righteousness of God" is that through which the righteous lives by the gift of God, that is through faith . . . As intensely as I formerly hated the expression "righteousness of God," I now loved and praised it as the sweetest of concepts.

Luther said that, where before he hated these words of the Apostle Paul, now he loved them. Luther called these verses in Romans "The Gates to Paradise." The man who hated God became a champion for the loving, gracious God he could now approach. Now Luther knew what Paul meant when he wrote:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1 NIV).

Luther now had peace with God, freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin through faith in Jesus. That's the heart of the Reformation. That's the heart of Lutheranism.

Freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin. Not freedom to sin more and more, but freedom to live more and more for Christ and to grow more and more like Christ, empowered

by the Gospel. Along with freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin through faith in Jesus, comes peace with God. Unlike the young man Luther, you do not have to fear that you have not done enough to earn God's favor. You don't need to be afraid of the righteous God or hate the righteous God. You have peace with God. Jesus has done everything necessary for your salvation and he's done it all perfectly. You, a believer in Jesus stand clothed in his perfection, his righteousness and *this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

Along with freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin, comes peace in the face of death. Jesus has promised believers that we will live even though we die. You have freedom to face the day of your death without fear, knowing that you are justified, declared not guilty, by faith alone, and that you will stand before God clothed in righteousness, a gift of faith in Jesus. Amen.