

"The Never-ending Reformation" Romans 3:19-28 Reformation 2023

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day each year where we gather in churches to sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", the liturgical color for the day is red, and we talk about Martin Luther. Some people really look forward to this day. Others think it's a nice thing occasionally, but wonder why are we commemorating something that happened nearly 500 years ago? What was the big deal about a monk in a city in Germany posting a piece of paper to the doors of a church that we celebrate yet today? Our Epistle reading for today is going to help guide us through that discussion and help us understand that Reformation Sunday isn't just about something that happened 500 years ago, it's about something that's happening yet today.

To really understand the importance of the Reformation, one must understand the spiritual condition of the Church of the early 16th Century. The church of this day was full of fear and uncertainty. People bought indulgences – certificates of forgiveness – in exchange for money, collected so that Pope Pius could build St. Peter's Cathedral. People worried about their faith, fearful that they were not good enough for salvation. And if there was anyone who knew what it was like to live in constant fear at the idea of an angry, vengeful God, it was Dr. Luther. Early on in his life, Luther viewed Jesus Christ as only an angry judge, a vengeful God waiting to throw Luther into the depths of hell for eternity over his sins. He tried everything he possibly could to

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try to appease God. He confessed every single sin he could think of in the confessional to his father confessor, he tortured himself, he deprived himself of food and sleep, but the harder he worked, the further he went into despair. "God is righteous, I am not. Because of that, God will judge me to eternal damnation" were Luther's thoughts of God.

That is, until he really started studying the Scriptures. In our Epistle reading from Romans 3, he finally understood what that phrase "The Righteousness of God" truly meant. Here, he read, in the words of our text: "For there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Okay, he knew that all too well. But it was the part that followed that changed everything. St. Paul continues: "and (all) are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." That was wonderful news for Martin Luther! God's righteousness wasn't something that Luther, or anyone else had to earn through prayer, confession, penance, works, or indulgences, it was a gift from Christ for all who believe! We are justified by Christ, so that when God sees us, it is "just as if I had never sinned!" What great news! It wasn't about me; it was all about Christ. It was all about Christ and what He did for us at the cross. No wonder Luther felt he could never atone for his sins, because all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But Christ justifies us. It wasn't our work; it was all Christ's work

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for us! That's what the Gospel is all about. That's what Christ's life, death, and resurrection were all about!

So, with this new-found truth of the Gospel from the Word of God, Dr. Luther now finds his parishioners coming to him, telling him "Guess what, Pastor? We were over in the village across the river the other day, and we heard Tetzal, and we bought this indulgence, and he said that the pope said that if we bought this, we could get out of purgatory and get into heaven! Isn't that awesome! You'd better tell everybody that John Tetzal is in the area, and maybe even invite him to come here to Wittenberg so we can get everybody saved! Oh, happy day!"

Luther's reaction was to do what any theologian of the day would do when a controversial subject came up. He called for a debate based on the Scriptures on the topic of the sale of indulgences. He developed 95 theses that agreed with the Word, showing how the practice of indulgences was not a scriptural practice, and posted them to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, which was in essence the "bulletin board" of the community. Printers got hold of them, copied them on their printing presses, and they spread like wildfire. Luther continued to preach from the pulpit that one was not saved by their own works or labors, but solely by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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This didn't go over very well with the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Luther was asked to recant, and he refused. Even when it led to his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church, which led to the Holy Roman Emperor naming Luther an "outlaw" meaning anyone could kill him at any time without penalty. Luther didn't set out to start out a new church, his original hope was to reform the existing church of his day. When that failed, he started a church which would have what would come to be known as the "three sola's", as it's motto: "Sola Scriptura" meaning "Scripture Alone", Sola Fide "Faith Alone", and Sola Gratia" "Grace Alone" to be the base of its belief. It would be a church that would retain all that was good and profitable for salvation and served to teach the truth of the Gospel, but whatever would lead astray from the faith of the Scriptures would be reformed.

Okay, that was 500 years ago. But what about for us who call ourselves Lutheran today? Luther once said that that the Reformation of the church is ongoing. There are constant threats against her. And when one looks out at the church that bears the great reformer's name today, one sees that indeed, there is a need for an ongoing reformation. We're fighting a two front war that wants to rob us of our belief that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and turn it

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something else, something that cannot save us from sin, death, and the devil.

Today, there are preachers who tell you “if you just give me enough of your money, God will show you favor in this life. You will be healed of your diseases, you will have riches beyond your wildest dreams.”

But there’s another attack that reminds us that the Reformation is ongoing. In today’s Gospel reading, St. Matthew tells us “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been suffering violence, and the violent have been seizing it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you’re willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come. Let anyone who has ears listen.” Today, we have churches that bear the name “Lutheran” who no longer are abiding in the Word of Christ, and have abandoned it instead for whatever feels good to the sinful, fallen world in an attempt to be popular. Instead of calling sin what it is according to the Word of God, it is now calling it a mere “alternative lifestyle”, as they refuse to hear God’s word of warning in His Law. Instead of living by the Reformation principle of “Sola Scriptura”, they have now turned God’s Word into a doctrinal buffet table, which one can pick and choose from what they want and pass over the rest. But when that happens, when one begins

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to doubt the authority of the Word, where do you stop? When we no longer listen to God's Word of law, eventually, we come to believe that we must be good people, and don't need to be forgiven of anything, so Jesus didn't really die for my sins, he just tells me how to be a good person. When that happens, we have looked at Christ on the cross, and spit in that image, and said "We don't need that, we're not sinful. We don't need a Savior from anything." When that happens, we cease to be the church, and have become just another social club.

Indeed, Reformation Sunday is a wake-up call for us. We are reminded that yes, the Reformation began nearly 500 years ago, but it continues for us today. We are reminded of the constant need to look to Christ and the cross for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. We are reminded not to boast in ourselves, but to boast about Christ. When reformation is called for, that's exactly what we need, reformation that is in line with the Word of God. On this Reformation Sunday, with all that has happened and continues to happen in the Lutheran Church in this country, now more than ever, we need to remember that the Reformation of the church continues, that it is centered in the message of sins forgiven through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that our work as the church is to proclaim the message of the angel in our reading in Revelation, "with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and

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people." (Rev. 14:6) May God use us as His Reformation instruments to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified, for the sins of the world to the people in our community, and throughout the world for Jesus' sake. Amen.