

SERMON
+ Reformation Sunday
October 27, 2024

Reformation marks the anniversary
of the day in 1517 that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther
is said to have nailed a list of 95 topics for scholastic debate
on the university's public bulletin board:
the doors of All Saints Church – the castle church –
at Wittenberg University.

Luther had hoped that debate on these items
would spark a reformation of the church
so that certain practices and abuses would be changed.
Instead, he fanned a fire
that ended up dividing the church
and creating the first of many denominational churches.

Certain things have come to be associated
with celebrating Reformation Sunday.
For example, we just have to sing
Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."
Check that one off the list.

For us, for nearly 30 years,
it means having communion with a different kind of bread
because our bread for the day
is a gift to us from our Catholic sisters and brothers
of St. Therese's church.
And we'll get to that, too.

But more than anything, celebrating the Reformation
means we focus on Luther's revolutionary realization –
his discovery in his study of the scriptures –
about how God relates with human creatures:
the article by which the church stands or falls,
taken from Paul's letter to the Romans, our second reading,
"Justification by grace through faith."

Thanks to his study of St. Paul's letters,

including, of course, our second reading today, and John's gospel,
the Psalms and the prophets,
Luther came to realize
that God always acts first
in dealing with humanity.

God does the acting up front,
and only God can make us acceptable.
And he does.
Because God is God.

God does all that is necessary
in the loving sacrifice of his only beloved son
to make us acceptable,
to adopt us to live in the Spirit,
to bring us into a right relationship,
that is, to justify us,
to save us.
And the things we try to do to save ourselves
only show our lack of faith
in God's ability to do God's work,
or our desire to be God,
which, of course, is human sin.

Through the action and merit of Jesus
God justifies us,
not because we deserve it,
or have earned it,
or could do anything about it,
but because God wants to.
By God's sheer grace,
God makes us right.

That, in essence, is what "justified by grace through faith" means.
And Reformation provides an opportunity
to remember that fundamental understanding
of our faith and our God.

And we need to be reminded of it, too,
again and again,

because our inclination is
to NOT accept it or believe it,
but to strive to do it ourselves.

Yet, there it is in Paul's letters, especially Romans,
in John's gospel
and throughout the prophets and Psalms.

It is God who is God, and we are not.
"And we are justified" – made right before God –
"by God's grace as a gift
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

So, since God has taken care of the big stuff –
since God has given us such an amazing gift
and has already claimed us as his own,
justified us, saved us,
made us acceptable,
what now for us?

Jesus tells us in John's gospel:
"If you continue in my word
you are truly my disciples
and you will know the truth
and the truth will set you free."

By Christ's death and resurrection,
and his fulfillment of the law and the prophets,
he sets us free to a new life,
with new and different possibilities,
not bound by the pressures and limits
of our worldly ways –
the ways of fear, failure, death, and sin.

By God's acceptance of us even as we are,
we are free from worry and strife about our salvation,
and we can get on with living in our community as God intends,
living out the commandments and serving others,
sharing our abundance and loving our neighbor,
showing mercy and forgiving others.

Not because we must, but because we can;
because we are free to live that way.

In the end, that is the difference
between those who are not rooted in Christ's word,
and those who continue in his word
and live in the freedom of the gospel:

For those who are not in Christ,
their focus is still on themselves
and their own survival and salvation
and worries about what they must do about it.

Making decisions,
relating to others,
even worshiping
is done in a way that is concerned with
“What will I get out of this?”
or “How do I do this rightly?”

But those who know Christ and his truth
are baptized into his death and resurrection,
filled with the Holy Spirit of God,
and are given new life and a fresh start,
and a daily routine of repentance and forgiveness.

Those who are joined with Christ
are set free by God –
free from the worries and self-centeredness
that mark life in the ways of human sin.
Our focus is no longer enslaved to obsessing about ourselves.

Instead, we are free to think of others –
free to love others just as the commandments teach us.
We no longer need to worry about ourselves
because God has taken care of that.

We can focus instead on serving others,
loving others,
living in and with others of the community

and introducing them to Christ
through our words and actions
so that they can know his freedom, too.

Life lived in freedom in Christ
is life lived in daring confidence
that God fulfills his promise,
that God's word is true,
that God does indeed love you enough to die for you,
and that in that death
God has done everything necessary for your salvation.

Life lived in freedom in Christ
is life lived in daring confidence
that he is truth –
God's gracious gift to you –
and you believe and trust in him.

Life lived in freedom in Christ
is life lived in obedience to him and his way –
obedient to the command to love.

In his freedom and in the love of God,
you are free to love others.
That, in essence, is what we celebrate today,
and what we should remember
every day of our free life in Christ.
Amen