

REFORMATION SUNDAY

Freed by Christ to be Free in Christ

Pastor Mark Nieting
October 25, 2009

Romans 2

What do Lutheran Christians think about, and, to make it more personal, what comes to your mind first when you remember that this is Reformation Sunday? Perhaps you anticipate singing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, or envision Luther's Seal, or how many in our congregation will be wearing red. Maybe you remember all the memory work you did from Luther's Small Catechism during Confirmation. Possibly you've read some of Luther's Works, or one of his many biographies. You remember the movie about him that came out of Hollywood just a few years ago, one we've shown at Hope before.

Today we give thanks to God for Dr. Martin Luther: theologian, pastor, professor, husband, father, hymn-writer, scholar, musician, and humble Augustinian monk, who faced down the mighty powers of his world to stand tall for the truth that he found in the pages of God's holy Word: *salvation is a gift from God*.

Armed with a knowledge of the original Biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, and driven by a passion to know where "he stood with God," Luther cut through 1500 years of church history and tradition in an almost obsessive attempt to find peace for his own heart in the face of his own sinfulness. When he finally realized the treasure that was buried in the pages of God's Holy Word, he translated first the New and then the Old Testament into the language of his people so EVERYONE could be set free in Christ Jesus....as HE had been set free!

If we gather today only to celebrate the accomplishments of one man, however great they were, we would be praising a mere man. If we only boast of the "integrity" of our Lutheran theology, this day would ring hollow in far too many ears. And if we were to merely give a sociological glance at Luther's role in unifying the German people through his linguistic work, we would fall FAR short of the magnitude of what we DO celebrate: Jesus has set us FREE, forever!

The Reformation was not a single event or a snapshot in time. There were some marvelous moments: Luther's experience in the lightning storm that drove him out of law school and into the monastery, nailing the 95 theses on the church door in an attempt to get the attention of the Roman church, his discovery of some magnificent verses of Scripture, and his famous "*Here I stand, I cannot recant*" when pressed to abandon what he had discovered in Romans and Ephesians. But on the whole, the Reformation is Luther's Spiritual Journey, along with those who worked with him and then, over the next 500 years, that of countless other Christians from his time down to our time.

Before we examine our OWN journey of faith, let's review Luther's. Life in Germany 500 years ago wasn't particularly easy. It was, for the most part, fairly grim. You were ruled by princes, dukes, and emperors and, of course, by the church, which portrayed God as

being constantly angry at them for their sins. People lived fearing that God would send them to hell unless they followed a strict set of rules, principles and traditions, and even then no one died believing they would enter heaven. Instead they lived expecting to spend thousands of years in 'purgatory' working off their sins.....unless some benevolent relative paid cash to the church to shorten their sentence.

Such was Luther's life.... filled with one burden after another:

- constant confession
- punishing, even whipping himself
- repeated prayers
- doing penance
- facing purgatory
- obsessed with good works
- trying to remember each sin
- living in fear of God
- even doing a pilgrimage to Rome, all in an attempt to earn God's love and forgiveness... and to calm his troubled soul. There was no peace, there was no joy and there was absolutely no certainty of eternal salvation, all made worse by the fact that life could be ended by something as simple as a common cold. Living like this....and facing the end of life like this....would be terrifying.

[DURING THIS I WILL BRING UP A VOLUNTEER... MOST LIKELY ONE OF THE TEENS OR YOUNG(ER) ADULTS AND "BURDEN" THEM EACH TIME I MENTION ONE OF THE ABOVE POINTS BY STACKING BOX AFTER BOX ONTO THEM, EACH LABELED WITH THESE "BURDENS." REMIND THEM THAT THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO DROP ANY OF THESE BOXES OR GOD WILL BE ANGRY!]

Something in Luther's Life Had To Give.....and finally it did. Luther turned to God's Word. He poured over the pages of the Latin Bible, something few people DID in his day because a) few people could read the Biblical languages; b) very few Bibles even existed, not even one per town or per church(!); and c) the church discouraged anyone from reading those Bibles that did exist.

[ASK THE VOLUNTEER HOW HE/SHE IS HOLDING UP UNDER THE BURDEN. ARE THEY FEELING FREE? ARE THEY EVEN FEELING LOVED? HOW LONG WILL THEY BE ABLE TO HOLD OUT?]

SOMETHING had to change. SOMETHING had to enable Luther, and countless others after him, to let go of these tremendous burdens and find peace and hope with God. For Luther, the proverbial 'straw that broke the camel's back' was when John Tetzel showed up in Wittenburg pushing the sale of "indulgences," literally SELLING the forgiveness of sins.

[ONE LAST BOX; INDULGENCES, IS ADDED.]

Luther tore into the pages of Scripture, finally finding verse after verse. Imagine how he felt when, maybe even for the first time he read the words of today's Gospel lesson from John 8: *Anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Luther certainly knew how THAT felt. A slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. SO...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!*"

The burdens started falling as Luther began to understand what Jesus did.

[PASTOR REMOVES SEVERAL OF THE BOXES.]

FREE INDEED? I CAN BE FREE? Luther read more, this time from today's Epistle in Romans 3: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* This was no surprise to Luther.....he LIVED in fallen-ness. But the next verses brought relief: *....and (we) are JUSTIFIED FREELY by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus!*

More burden fell away [more boxes are removed] and Luther discovered more. Ephesians 2: 8-9, *it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is a GIFT from God, not by works!* Luther felt God LIFT the rest of the burden from his shoulders and from his soul, this time knowing that it was not what HE had done, but what Jesus had already done for HIM.

[THE BOXES ARE ALL REMOVED.....AND A CHEER OF JOY IS HEARD!]

What are the burdens you carry in your life? Where has your spiritual journey led you? How is your study of Scripture and your prayer life? Today's celebration of the Reformation reminds us that the devil, the world, and our own sinful human nature conspire EVERY DAY to pile burden after worry after false teaching back onto us.....each moving us further away from the truths of God's word and the reality of what Jesus did for us on the cross of Calvary.

There are 3 great truths that have come to us as the Legacy of the Reformation, truths that we express in their traditional Latin form as:

- ***Sola Gratia***
- ***Sola Fides***
- ***Sola Scriptura***

What do they mean?

- *Sola Gratia: Our salvation comes ENTIRELY by God's grace, not our works.*
- *Sola Fide: Our salvation is given to us through the GIFT of FAITH in Jesus.*
- *Sola Scriptura: The BIBLE is the ONLY source and authority in Christian life.*

Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone, those 3 principles summarize the heritage of our faith and our church, and it is important to remember and celebrate them. But if we relegate them to "ancient history," then today's church becomes only a stagnant pond gathering around the social causes of the day and the shifting winds of modern culture.

Instead, the church, our church, and each individual Christian....you and I included, must continue to keep ourselves firmly grounded in grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone by being a confessing church, a baptizing church, a witnessing church, a welcoming church, a rejoicing church, a serving church, a studious church, all focused on what Christ Jesus has already done for us on the cross.

AMEN!