

The Festival of the Reformation
29 October, Anno Domini 2017
St. John 8:31-38
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

500 years! Can you trace your family history back that far? I think it would be somewhere around 14 or 15 generations. Empires have risen and fallen. Mighty men have been brought to ashes. We've moved from the first moveable type printing press to virtual reality. Our ancestors from the days of the Reformation are, of course, long gone and most, long forgotten. The far-reaching effects of the Reformation on all aspects of society are too many to count - government, banking, education, language.

Everything has changed and nothing has changed since Luther strode up to Wittenberg's Castle Church door and nailed up the 95 theses on indulgences for debate. The world may look completely different with advances in communication, transportation, architecture and medicine but at its core the world is exactly the same as it was 500, 1000, even 6000 years ago. Sin still infests everything and everyone. False preachers run around hawking their wares like Johann Tetzel and his indulgences, trying to convince us that salvation can be bought with money or our own efforts. Our sinful flesh is still waging bitter war against God and His Word, leading us down the broad road that ends in eternal destruction. The same devil who had successfully obscured the Gospel by the Middle Ages is still roaming around, hunting for souls to ensnare and drag to eternal punishment, turning people and nations against one another, seeking always to drive us into despair.

That is why the Reformation is such a big deal. The Gospel that Luther and his fellow Reformers rediscovered by the grace of God is the same Gospel that this dark, broken world has always needed and will continue to always need. Without that Gospel there can be no hope, no peace. There can never be another means of salvation than the death and resurrection of God's Son. That hasn't changed. It is still, just as it always has been and always will be, about Jesus. Luther wasn't concerned about religious freedom or even everyone having his own Bible. He wanted sinners to know the real Jesus. His work for us. His Word for us. His forgiveness. His peace. Jesus. Only Jesus. Christ alone can bring us redemption and

freedom from our slavery to sin. That was the beating heart of the Reformation and it is the beating heart of our preaching still today.

The Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries wasn't promoting something new. That's why, ironically, we can and rightly do say that we hold to the truly catholic faith. What Luther taught and preached is what Jesus had taught and preached, what Elijah, Isaiah, David, Moses, and Adam all taught and preached. It wasn't a new Gospel for a new generation. The very last thing Luther wanted was something new. What he wanted was something old, something God had prepared before the foundations of the world were first laid. Luther wanted a merciful God. Until the Scriptures were opened to him, the only God that Luther and most everyone else knew of was a wrathful God who made demands of us that we could never hope to keep and then condemned us for not keeping them.

Of course, Luther's struggle in the face of such a horrific God is well-known. He was tormented by his guilt. His conscience was plagued by the reality that he deserved damnation for his sins. He spent untold hours in the confessional trying to make sure that every sin he could possibly imagine was confessed. He labored endlessly trying desperately to work off the temporal punishment he deserved by works of penance appointed by the priest. He sorely abused his body trying to purge himself and keep his flesh from sin. All for nothing. None of it worked. Not because Luther was doing it wrong. But because it can't work - ever for anyone. There was never going to be a way for Luther to put his conscience at ease by his own efforts. None of us can. None of us can ever do enough to be able to confidently stand before God and avoid the guilty sentence.

We are all slaves. That's the reality. If you sin, you are a slave to your sin. Otherwise, you wouldn't do it. The proof that sin rules in your flesh is the simple truth that you can't stop. Not a day, not an hour goes by, that you are free of sinful desires, sinful words, and sinful actions because you are not free of your sinful flesh and won't be until the day you die. There is simply no use in denying it, even though that is exactly what we try to do on a regular basis. We desperately want to believe that we are strong enough, that we are good enough, that we aren't evil. We confuse what we want with what is good. We justify our anger, our lust, our impatience, our covetousness, our laziness, our indifference, and our silence. Like good

addicts we try to convince ourselves and everyone else that we can quit whenever we want.

But the tormented conscience, the conscience that honestly looks within, the conscience that feels the searing heat of the Law's accusation knows better. It knows that there could never be enough confessing, enough kind words, enough self-mortification to right its grievous wrongs. What Luther longed for, what the conscience pricked by the divine Law longs for, was finally revealed to him when in the Holy Scriptures he read this profound truth - "The righteous shall live by faith." Righteousness isn't something I do. It's something God gives. He offers His Son as a propitiation by His Blood. He proclaims this good news and the Holy Spirit brings me to believe what Christ has done for me. I am then counted righteous for the sake of Jesus.

I can't be righteous if righteousness is the measure of my holiness. If God's righteousness is nothing more than His moral perfection, then I have only hell in my future. And that's what my reason tells me. My reason tells me that I have been bad and therefore must be good in order to please God. My reason tells me that if I can get people who are better than me to pray for me, God is more likely to listen. My reason tells me that I am not nearly as bad as others. Then again, my reason is my great betrayer. Reason asks questions like "What must I do to inherit eternal life" and "Did God really say? But there isn't anything I can do and yes, God did really say. I am a slave. My sinful flesh is bound to the will of one who hates me and seeks my destruction. My desires are filled to overflowing with selfishness and hatred for others.

But this false teaching of salvation by works has always and will always be condemned by God because it is a lie. From Cain, to the Pharisees, to the papists, to all today who take up the cause - all forms of works righteousness are completely and utterly rejected. The notion that in any way my salvation depends upon my efforts has been rejected as long as there has been sin. Sinners have never been satisfied with the Gospel, the grace and mercy of God for sinners. And just as surely as that Gospel was under assault in Luther's day, so it is in ours and what fools we would be to trade it in for anything less. We only place our consciences in grave danger when we listen to and share the voices and words of those who try to drive the Gospel back into the shadows, back into darkness and obscurity. False preaching needs to be silenced not tolerated because

false preaching condemns, false preaching leads away from Jesus and back to death.

The Reformation is about this truth and nothing else - salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This eternal gospel, believed by the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, is exactly the same Gospel delivered to us in Christ and proclaimed through the apostolic witness of Holy Scripture. Jesus has set you free. Not the pope. Not indulgences. Not your decisions. Not your works or your good intentions. Jesus. By His cross, Jesus has paid the price of your ransom and set you free from your bondage to sin. He has forgiven you and cut death's chains that once bound you. In Baptism you have died to sin and in Baptism you have been raised to new life in Christ.

There is no other version of this truth even as there is no other Jesus. We here today, 500 years after Luther, still need the same Jesus. Nothing has changed. We still rebel against the Word of God. We still set up all kinds of idols for our hearts to be enslaved to. But it is still only Jesus who has died for us. The Blood He spilled those 2000+ years ago is the same Blood that we need today. You aren't different, better or worse, than Luther or any of God's dear saints who have gone before you in the faith. Luther was plagued with the same broken flesh we are. The opportunities to indulge the flesh may look different but they are really all the same. Death is still death.

But, then again, Jesus is still Jesus - the same yesterday, today, and always. He still comes to be with sinners. He still pours out peace and mercy to hurting consciences. His Word, His promise, will never change. The forgiveness that washed over you in Baptism will never change, never be taken away. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will never pass away." That means that Jesus will not change His mind about saving you, about choosing you, about taking away your sins. He isn't going to one day decide that He's had enough and He's tired of showing you mercy. His mercy endures...forever. When Jesus offered His sinless Body and Blood to make atonement, it was once and for all. Nothing remains. Jesus started and completed our salvation. And He offers it as a free gift to all who will believe. He wants you to have this gift. All have sinned and all have been justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that He has purchased with His Blood.

We really do have so much to give thanks to God for as we celebrate this 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Certainly, we give thanks to God for the tremendous work accomplished through Luther. If you haven't read much of Luther, start. You will find some of the richest and most comforting preaching of the Gospel you will ever know. But it isn't Luther that makes Luther great. It's not even Luther we are celebrating. It is Jesus. The same Jesus that brought comfort to poor Luther's troubled conscience brings it to yours today. He sets you free, absolving you by His Word, and giving you as food the Body and Blood sacrificed to make that Word of forgiveness possible. In the years since the Reformation, the devil has worked hard to silence this preaching of Jesus again. Yet here you and I sit, still hearing the same Word of God in all its truth and purity, still confessing Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins all by the same grace of the same Jesus. Thanks and praise be to God, indeed!

May God grant us true steadfastness in this truth, the one true faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who has set us free from our sins. May we never shrink back from believing or confessing this truth though the whole world, hell, and the devil himself threaten to destroy us. May God the Holy Spirit keep us steadfast in His Word and put to shame all those who would pervert His Word and lead us astray.

In the Name of +Jesus.