

Reformation Sermon November 01 2020  
Philippians 4:4  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you, image of God, from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I think of Reformation celebrations past, the things that come to mind include Martin Luther, 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and in particular, Germany, the struggles and abuses that marked that era, and the 95 Theses that were used to stir up Pope Leo X and the Roman Catholic Church. The pope was on the nose, the peasants were revolting, the whole box and dice was shaken up, and out fell the Lutheran Church.

There's nothing wrong with those commemorations. Acknowledging past institutional suffering is important to our sense of identity and appreciation of our heritage. A deeper understanding of history gives us a stronger sense of who we are today. But there's more to celebrating the Reformation than recalling events from 500 years ago. We must be aware of what's happening now and mindful of the future that awaits.

While there's much that can be said about events in our past, present, and future, today I want to shift the focus to our attitude toward the past, the present, and the future. And I'd like to develop this from St Paul's exhortation to the Christians at Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4).

These are incredible words indeed, especially when we consider the struggles Paul was experiencing at the time. Things are grim in Paul's life. He's in dire personal straits; he's in prison; he's being attacked by other Christians; he's surrounded by people who are jealous of him; his theology is under attack; his toil for the gospel is in danger of eroding; he doesn't know for how much longer he'll live. To top it off, a dear and close friend had been very ill and had walked through the valley of the shadow of death. To which Paul responds, "Rejoice in the Lord, always..."

The years of the Reformation were just as turbulent. Men and women clung to their faith at the cost of their homes, houses, properties, businesses. Yet, Luther and his friends weren't overwhelmed. They wrote great confessions, prepared beautiful hymns and encouraging prayers, and conducted themselves in a spirit of exuberant hope. They preached great sermons, offered beautiful explanations of God's mercy, and trod fearlessly where angels feared saying, with Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord, always..."

Are we so different today? The prophets of doom are still in full voice and just as irritating. The Church is surrounded by naysayers who want to destroy her work; that destruction is the fate we ought to suffer. Within the Church some argue that there are fewer who are "genuinely" faithful, and that young people aren't interested in the foundations of their faith. It's tough being a Christian today.

Young people in our church are surrounded by delicious temptations that are dangled within easy reach, and while older Christians have suffered temptations too, I don't believe that anyone has faced the pressures that young Christians have experienced in the last 20 years. And yet, they believe.

And it's tough taking a Christian commitment to work in the modern industrial complex that only views people as productive units of work. The size of government and industry, and the general attitude of antiauthoritarianism in Australia makes it extremely difficult to give Christian expression to your vocation. That's if you can even get a job in the first place. But tough times are the breeding grounds of Christian hope and conviction which encourage us to say, "Rejoice in the Lord, always..." in defiance of the world's pessimism.

What's there to rejoice about? The very same thing that stirs the soul and gives courage to all Christians, "The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5), and that Lord, our Lord at hand, brought, brings, and will bring, his gifts.

I don't have time to rattle off all the gifts which the Lord brings but there are a few gifts that are salient in our celebration of the Lord's continuing Reformation.

Justification. Lutherans have justification in their DNA. Justification isn't the only doctrine of scripture, nor the only message that God imparts in his Word. But Lutherans believe that it's fundamental to understanding God's relationship to humanity and the world. Justification is God's act of sending his Son into the world. Jesus takes upon himself the sins of us all, and makes payment for them, earning for and giving us the forgiveness we need. Justification makes manifest, the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning God's will: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). Justification is the building block of the Lutheran Christian's faith from which springs all kinds of God's other wonderful gifts.

For example, we see how grace works. We learn that grace isn't earned by us by virtue of our worth, competence, skill, goodness, purity, or piety. Rather, grace is that sweet disposition of our Lord to give us all the goodness which we don't deserve and could never earn. It's by grace that we are freed from the clutches of sin, death, and the devil to live in a lively and intimate relationship with God who wants us to know him as Abba; Daddy; Papa. "Rejoice in the Lord, always..." that grace-filled justification is the mark of his care for us.

Justification and grace are two great Lutheran themes that help us celebrate the Lord's continuing Reformation, but I reckon we always need to hear the obvious. We all desperately need to hear and experience God's forgiveness and come to know the blessing of his divine amnesia. I don't think we need to review human history to understand Genesis 6:5, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." Watch the news, observe others, check the dark recesses of your own heart. Man is evil – that's true. But it isn't the full truth. The full truth is that in Christ, every person has the possibility to become a forgiven person. God has provided his own abundant pardon. Saints, revel and rejoice in this hope. We have cause in God's goodness, to rejoice always. While it's necessary to confess loudly and with sorry conviction, "I am a sinner," the full statement is, "By the grace of God, in Christ Jesus, I am a forgiven sinner." Rejoice!

But how do we know this? We confess that this is the work of the Holy Spirit and we admit that he may come directly to any person at any time in any way. We also know that God has told us that there are means through which he reaches most of us. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and through Holy Scripture, God brings faith into our heart and enables us to believe. Lutherans treasure the sacraments dearly and have a wonderful feel for the scriptures. We can't give up any part of God's Word. We tremble before the Law and frolic like children in the wonder of the Gospel. The Scripture is "the sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:17); a precious part of God's continuing Reformation. God's Word is our great heritage and the means by which he reveals his favour toward us, and seals it in our heart. Rejoice!

As I mentioned at the beginning, we need to draw together the past, the present, and the future in order to view the Reformation, not as a past event, but as a continuing celebration of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us in the future.

First, we can say that we stand tall in the tradition of the past, living with the same conviction, commitment, and hope of our ancestors – claiming a heritage based on God's gracious disposition toward us.

Second, we can say that we believe the future is in the hand of the same God who gave us our past and jealously guards our present. Because of that we have reason to rejoice and rejoice always.

Third, we will make it to the future by trusting in the same things that our forefathers and mothers did – justification, grace, abundant pardon for sin, and the means of grace. These things got them through and they'll get us through. Rejoice!

Fourth, we believe there is a future for us, secured in Christ, in which we have cause to celebrate the Reformation as a continuing active and ever-present joy. Rejoice!

Dear Saints, the world is changing and you are changing because God is re-forming you into his own image – holy, merciful, gracious, abounding in love and faithfulness, kind, gentle, forgiving. Change is unsettling for many, but you are safe because God never changes. God is forever constant and consistent in his unconditional providence, protection, and promise of salvation and love for those whom he’s created in his own image.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, you are outrageously loved beyond your wildest expectation, by God our Father, through Jesus Christ his Son our Lord and Saviour, by the power of his Holy Spirit. Saints, we have every reason to, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.