

Commemoration of the Reformation 27 October 2024
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[St Paul says], For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Let's pray: ...

507 years ago, on the eve of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic priest by the name of Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and requested a meeting of the church leaders to debate their substance.

At the time, Luther had no idea what drastic changes this would ignite, but posting the 95 Theses began a chain reaction that resulted in the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther is a significant personality in human history, but who is he?

Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type printing press, making books widely available and affordable for the first time. Luther saw an opportunity to spread religion and education to the common people, so he translated the entire Bible into the German language, thereby standardising the language for his nation. He's also credited for laying the foundation of democracy.

As Lutherans, we know some information about Luther. What happened on that day 507 years ago when Luther posted the 95 Theses was simply the culmination of a long, personal struggle that had been fermenting within Luther's soul and spirit.

Luther grew up in an age when the church pictured God as an angry, vindictive God, watching over us, waiting for someone to make a mistake so that he could punish them with eternal suffering in hell. The Roman Catholic Church taught people to fear God in the negative sense of the word, and as fear is an extremely effective tool for controlling people, the Catholic Church wielded it mercilessly, allowing the Pope to amass tremendous wealth and power in Europe.

As a young man, Luther decided that eternal hell sounded rather unappealing, so he set out to make himself right before God. He left a promising future in law and took on the disciplines of becoming an Augustinian monk. He was ordained as a priest, and later earned his Doctorate in Bible and Theology. Eventually he became a professor at one of the new and upcoming schools of the Catholic Church, the University of Wittenberg in Germany.

Still, Luther didn't find what he desperately longed for - peace with God and a sense of assurance and rest for his troubled spirit. It seemed no matter how hard he tried to be good and obedient to the commands of God and the Church, he found it impossible.

No matter how hard he strove to do everything a Christian was supposed to do, he realised that he was still a sinner. And since he was taught that God punishes sinners, he felt condemned before God.

"God is holy and just. I am a poor, miserable sinner, no matter how hard I try. How can a holy God possibly love a sinner like me?" Despite doing everything the church said a person should do to win God's mercy and forgiveness, it didn't ease Luther's conscience. He still saw himself as too much a sinner, and his frustration grew.

You see, Luther was simply more honest with himself than many people today, who tend to ignore and minimize sin, as though sin makes no difference to God. Luther saw his sin for what it really was – that which separated him from God.

Yet, despite his personal struggle, Luther developed quite a reputation as one of the looming stars of the Church; an extremely intelligent and gifted scholar and professor at the university. He was highly regarded and respected which helped give his school a prominent reputation.

Luther's liberation came one day as he was preparing for a series of lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans. Something he'd read many times before suddenly stood in stark contrast to the dread in his soul. From Romans 1:17 Luther read, "For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" And reinforced by our Epistle lesson today [Romans 3:19-28], the light came on! As Luther describes it, "It was as though the gates of heaven were opened to me!"

Suddenly, the truth of the Gospel blossomed before Luther's eyes, and he was instantly set free as Jesus says in our Gospel reading today:

- Set free from trying to make himself worthy and acceptable before God.
- Set free to simply rest in the grace and favour and love of God; grace and forgiveness freely given to us because of what Jesus Christ accomplished for us on the cross.

Luther rediscovered the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that had been buried beneath centuries of misuse and abuse by the Church.

Saints, the truth of the Gospel is that we're not saved by being good, or obeying the law, or going through all the outward rituals of religion, or anything else we try to do to make ourselves worthy before God. We're saved solely by the love and grace of God freely and generously given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation comes to us as a free gift of God's grace. All we can do is respond by saying, "Yes" to that gift in faith.

"Yes, Lord, I believe. Yes, Lord, I receive your gift of love and forgiveness and acceptance. Thank you, Lord, for loving and forgiving me in Jesus Christ."

Luther was bursting at the seams to share his new-found discovery with the world. “Justification by faith in Jesus” leapt out at him. The Bible was consistent in its message. God’s promise was real.

Sadly, the church leaders met Luther’s enthusiasm with resistance and persecution. Luther’s teaching could unravel their power and control over the people, and bring into question their considerable wealth.

And so, Luther was branded a heretic and every attempt was made to suppress his teaching. He was wanted, dead or alive, but was kidnapped by friends and hidden in Wartburg Castle.

While there, he undertook the enormous task of translating the entire Bible into the German language.

The Roman Catholic Church couldn’t silence Luther. He was the right man for the right time, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and armed with the truth of the Gospel. There’s no greater power than that.

What was missing in Luther’s life, and what the Holy Spirit revealed to him in the Scriptures, is the assurance of salvation.

He’d found the certainty of the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ, the pure joy and thrill that comes in knowing, “I am a saved, loved, and redeemed child of God!” [Say it after me]. Luther discovered the true and radical nature of God’s grace.

Hear it again from [John 3:16-17], “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Can it be any clearer?

Sadly, there are still many Lutherans and other Christians who continue to struggle with the same doubts that Luther had. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God raised him from death... but continue to doubt their salvation; who think that their salvation still depends on how good they are and how closely they follow all the rules.

I'm not saying that God doesn't care how we live. God desires that we stay close to him and that we live lives of honesty, integrity, and obedience to his will. But how we live doesn't save us. Jesus Christ saves us! That's the Gospel! That's the Good News that sets us free. We are saved by the grace of God through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

If you accept anything from this sermon today, I hope it's this:

- That God loves you; he has chosen you.
- That by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and made a child of God.
- That you leave here truly knowing the joy of your salvation.

God said to Jeremiah [31:33,34]: "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will be their God, and they shall be my people... They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

As Martin Luther read the Scriptures, he discovered the Gospel, and, as he put it, the "gates of heaven" opened to him.

As children of the Reformation, may we know that same assurance of God's love and grace, and may heaven be opened for us!

Jesus has indeed done all things necessary that we may live in him and he in us, forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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