

Reformation Day (Observed), October 26, 2008
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: John 8:31-36

The Reformation is the Gospel

Four hundred and ninety-one years ago this coming Friday, a 34-year-old Augustinian monk walked up to the castle church door in Wittenberg and nailed to that door 95 theses or statements written in Latin for the purpose of theological debate. That monk, Martin Luther, wanted to talk, to discuss these statements. He wanted to know why the teaching of the church, his church, did not square with what he had learned from Holy Scripture. Luther wanted to know that, if the pope had the power to release souls from purgatory, why he didn't just do so out of the goodness of his heart. Luther wanted to know how a piece of paper, an indulgence letter, could take away God's temporal punishments, as though God were a crooked jailer who could be bought with a bribe. Luther wanted to know what all this had to do with the Jesus who hung dead on a cross one good and dark Friday, for the sins of the whole world.

While many more significant events would occur under the heading of the Reformation, it is October 31 that has captured our attention and remembrance, for on that day Luther's hammer became the flint to strike the new fire of church life for the Christian faith. This is not a day for us to go bragging how the Lutherans got it right and the Roman Catholics got it wrong. This day is not about rebellion against authority, or about starting a new and better church, or even recovering the apostolic church. No, the Reformation was and is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, about the good news that Jesus Christ has taken away the sin of the world in His death

and resurrection. It is about the good news that for Christ's sake alone, through faith in Him, an otherwise poor and damned sinner stands justified before God.

The Reformation is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Jesus is about your justification. As we heard in today's Epistle reading: **"We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law"** (Romans 3:28).

If we are justified, why? To answer that question all you need is a mirror—the mirror of God's Law. Remember how Luther summarized it in his Small Catechism: **"Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?"** (Confession). Each of us knows how close to our hearts that truth has come. The Law of God shows that we are sinners, that we are in bondage to sin.

This is not the Law we having been looking for. We would rather have a Law we can post in public places and classrooms, a Law that will tell us that we aren't really all that bad, a Law that will require a few minor adjustments and we will be all better and improved. Yet the Law God gives is the one of which Pastor Paul writes to the Romans (3:19): **"Whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God."** The purpose of the Law is to shut every mouth before God. God is not interested in what you have done for Him lately. He already knows what you have done and He's not impressed. We are sinners—you and I both. We are guilty under the Law

before God. According to the Ten Commandments we are idolaters, blasphemers, despisers of His Word, disobedient to authority, murders, adulterers, thieves, liars, gossips, cheats, and coveters. We sin in our words, in our thoughts, and in our deeds. We sin by the things we do and by those things we haven't done.

The Law is intended to shut us up so we can listen, because we are so busy at times talking, trying to justify ourselves before each other and before God. We fail to hear how the Law holds us and the whole world accountable to God. The Law lets us know exactly what we have earned: **“The wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). And even in our economy no one misses Death's pay day. The Law underlines the fact that Jesus states: **“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin”** (John 8:34). The thing about slavery is that you cannot free yourself from it. Someone else, someone from outside the slavery needs to free you, redeem you, pay the price and buy you back.

The Jews to whom Jesus was talking didn't get it. They had Abraham's blood coursing through their veins, what more did they need? They had never been enslaved to anyone—never mind the little detail of 400 years in Egypt, never mind their past, that they had lived by mercy and not merit, by grace through faith. They could never free themselves any more than an indulgence letter could pardon from purgatory.

An indulgence letter was as much a fundraiser as it was a symptom of a deeper problem—merit. It was your merit versus your sins, held in the balance on the scales of Christ's justice. Luther knew what it was like to be pressed down hard by the Law, to be hemmed in by God. Luther had tried the merit badges of his good works, his fasts, his prayers. Yet there was no peace for Luther,

no comfort in the picture of the Christ he knew, a Christ who was judge. That was Luther's slavery and ours. What was needed was a completely different way of righteousness from God, not the way of the Law but the way of the Gospel, not the way of works or indulgences but the way of faith in Jesus.

Jesus is the justification you and I need. With His death and resurrection Jesus has redeemed us from slavery to sin. And if the Son sets you free, you truly are free. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, your sin and mine. God presented Jesus, His Son, as the atoning sacrifice through faith in His blood, His blood that cleanses us from all sin. His blood was shed on the cross. His blood that He gives us to drink in His supper. That's how sinners stand justified before a righteous God—not by works but by the blood of Jesus. That is how you and I are able to stand before God. It all comes back to this Gospel. It is the Gospel of which Luther wrote:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens

and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Truth that sets us free and makes us children of the heavenly Father. That is what Reformation Day is all about. That is what this congregation, Reformation Church, is all about—Christ and His forgiveness for us.

Henry V. Gerike