

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together”. Amen

The message for this day -Reformation Sunday is from the Gospel of John 8:31-38, which I read before. Let us pray: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Amen

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On this day, we as Lutherans naturally think about Martin Luther and the birthday of the Lutheran church. While these are valid things to celebrate on this day, if that is all we do, we will miss out. There is really a lot more to this day than Martin Luther and the birth of the Lutheran church. The message of the Scriptures uncovered by the Reformation is that by faith in Christ, before God we are free, saved by God the Father's grace for God the Son's sake through God the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. This is the true freedom. In Jesus, we are free from the guilt of our sin, free from the power of death to destroy us, and free to live for Jesus and for others. This is what we truly celebrate. We celebrate that God worked through Martin Luther to bring back the proclamation to the world that by Faith in Jesus Christ we are saved from our sin.

Reformation is not a time for boasting about ourselves. It is not about how Lutherans got it right and everyone else got it wrong. To be Lutheran is to be truly Christian - Christ-centred, with the preaching of His cross at the heart. What it means to be Lutheran has confused many people over the years. There are various kinds of Lutherans scattered all over the world. Some teachings are in line with the Scriptures, as so we share in unity with them.

Others, have borrowed too many teachings from sources that are not in line with Christ and so they have slid away from the Truth. Luther's initial reforming attitude of returning to the Scriptures and the early church's teachings should always be at the heart of what we do as Lutherans. He wrote the Small Catechism so that pastors and lay people could believe the simple truth of Jesus Christ. So it is a catechism based in God's word.

The Lutheran Church is a reforming church so that she always seeks to return to the truth of Christ found in His Word and given out in His Sacraments. The church can repent, change and grow up so that she can compassionately meet the needs of people in every time and place. The message never changes, but the method for giving that message can and will as the church lives on in the world, being a light in the world. Luther desired 1st for himself and 2nd for parishioners a closeness to a Saviour who seemed so far away. The prophet Isaiah says, “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” But all too often this does not bring us comfort. In fact for that little known German monk 500 years ago, this was downright terrifying.

For Luther, God's nearness did not bring him any comfort whatsoever, in fact it kept him up at all hours of the night praying, going to confession multiple times a day. God's hand was in everything, even the simple farmer or craftsman would recognize that, and that hand was heavy. Everywhere young Luther looked he saw God's all holy and all powerful hand. There was no place to hide, not even in a monastery. Luther could not escape from the reality that he was indeed a poor, miserable, sinner who was constantly reminded by everything around him, by all of creation that God was all holy... and he most certainly was not. The only comfort the monastery could provide was to keep God at a distance. This came through separating that which was spiritual with that which was physical. The philosophy was: cast off everything physical and climb the spiritual ladder up to God.

Today we do not go running off to the monastery as Luther did in his day. Yet if we really are honest with ourselves, we like to keep God at least at arm's length, away from us. As we do this we set up our own ladders in which we make an attempt of climbing up to God. We would rather try to live a good life following the rules. This becomes so objective, as our sin gets in the way, we construct our own rules and impose them on others, as do the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They saw themselves as free, but all they did was successfully tie their own souls and the souls of people to guilt and shame and sinfulness. The only way out is receiving Jesus Christ as a gift of faith.

When we see or read God's law, we realize just how poorly we have done what God has called us to do. The law will always accuse it, it will always show us our sin. We end up back at square one and instead of getting closer to God, we see just how far He is from us. We trust what we see and know. We cannot see God. We see our own lives, sometimes spiral out of control. Where is God in all of this, we ask? Luther asked the same questions, even whipped his own back to try and make God help him.

A man named "Stanley went to a psychiatrist." "Doc," he said, "I've got trouble. Every time I get into bed, I think there's somebody under it. I get under the bed, I think there's somebody on top of it. Top, under, top, under ... you gotta help me, I'm going crazy!" The doctor said "Just put yourself in my hands for two years." "Come to me three times a week, and I will cure your fears." He asked him "How much do you charge?" "A hundred dollars per visit." "I will think about it," Stanley replied. Six months later the doctor met Stanley on the street. "Why didn't you ever come to see me again?" asked the psychiatrist. "For a hundred bucks a visit? A friend cured me for ten dollars." "Is that so! How?" "He told me to cut the legs off the bed!"

Most of us, though, have fears which are much more difficult to overcome -- fear of failure, fear of having a particular disease, fear of dying, fear of the unknown, fear of letting others down, fear of living alone, just to name a few. When we are afraid or frightened, we will do whatever it takes to make the pain go away. What happens when it doesn't? What if the problem only gets worse before it gets better? Where is the closeness of God to be found?

The solution is in the TRUTH. "I am the way and the truth and the life", says our Lord, "no one comes to the Father but by Me". Jesus is truth. His Word is truth. The plan of salvation for the entire world is His truth. The cross is truth. The cold, hard, bitter truth. When God in the flesh becomes a vulnerable cursed victim paying the price for the divide we feel between ourselves and God. Jesus bridges the gap. He lays down His life. He drags you across with His outstretched hands, carrying you from the mess of sin to the peace of forgiveness. Jesus is perfect freedom. If the Son of God makes you free, you are free indeed.

While at times bondage to the world's ways can feel comfortable. While at times our own selfishness feels right at the time. It is easier taking care of # 1 than concerning ourselves with those in our midst who need a word of encouragement. God's Word of Law also tears the self-centred blinders off of our eyes and away from our hearts. We begin seeing the world through the lens of Jesus' cross. That in death, in suffering, in carrying His cross in life, we will have Jesus' life growing in us.

The re-discovery of the Reformation was that of a true teaching of the Cross. To embrace the cross. To let it be over us and in us and the heart of who we are. That we will suffer but whenever one door closes another one opens. God rescued Christ from the grave, so He will rescue you, too. He has. Your fate is washed in water, signed in Jesus' Blood, sealed with the Holy Spirit, written down in Heaven's book, given to you as comfort and strength everyday you remember your baptism in the name of our Triune God.

And if we desire a closeness to God, we find this as Jesus comes to us and stays with us, in His Word, at His Table, in our homes, in our jobs, in school, at the doctor, with fellow Christians; humbly, dependent, ready to receive and be taken care of. "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner," is our daily prayer. God will never leave you, never turn His back on you, never let you suffer beyond your breaking point. God never hides, or is He a passive bystander. He came to us as one of us and still comes to us today, in our worship, in our daily lives. *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* (1 Corinthians 10:13 ESV)

Our God is near, for Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." The great re-discovery of the Reformation was that if we want to see God, we need look no further than to Christ crucified for us. Any holiness that we can claim is Christ's holiness that has been given to us. Jesus says to us, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." That's the great mystery of the Church. Where Christ is, there the church is. The church's existence does not rest upon our faithfulness, our living perfect lives, it depends solely on the Word of God. Where the Gospel is plainly and purely preached, where His Sacraments are rightly administered, there He is really and personally present for me and for you.

*"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."* He is here right here and right now, as we hear that we are forgiven, we are His. His Word is truth. He is perfect Freedom. Amen

"The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour". Amen