

John 8:31-36; Reformation; October 30, 2022
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Grace to you and peace from God our creator, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our guide. Amen.

Happy Reformation! The day we celebrate the start of the Lutheran Church. The day we celebrate change. The day we look at what makes us Lutheran. As I was thinking about how Reformation can be considered the start of the Lutheran church, I was thinking that we celebrate a lot of “starts” in our church. We celebrate Advent - the start of the church year; we celebrate Christmas - the start or birthday of Jesus; we celebrate Easter - the start of a new way of thinking about salvation; and we celebrate Pentecost, the start of the Holy Spirit among us and what some would consider the start of the Christian church. So, if nothing, we are certainly flexible, or we just love to celebrate the church.

When thinking about Martin Luther and the Reformation, I came up with 3 C's that I will reflect on in today's sermon. The first is “change” - reformation - re-forming - changing the church. Luther didn't want to start a brand new branch of the church and he certainly didn't want his followers to call themselves Lutherans, he simply wanted to change some of the practices of the church at the time that didn't fit with what the word of God, the bible, said. He felt the church structure had become something that was getting in the way of people's connections to God. One of the main issues was that the church 500 years ago was very focused on “doing the right thing” or doing “works as prescribed

by law” in order to obtain favor with God and get into heaven. Then, in case you were concerned you didn’t have enough good works, you could simply buy indulgences as a way to guarantee your sins would be forgiven. Luther wanted to change the church and get rid of these practices since they were not what the bible was saying was the way to be right with God.

Yes, Luther changed the church, or ended up creating a division since the church didn’t want to change (not that a church today would ever be reluctant to change!) We might be tempted to think that because of what Luther did, the change part of the reformation is done. It isn’t. As noted as a footnote in the book “Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life” it says “If we are faithful to the spirit of the Lutheran Reformation, we will ask ‘What are our indulgences?’ - meaning ‘What is there in our institution which hinders us from hearing the LIVING WORD?’”

So, yes - we need to constantly be thinking about our church and what is hindering us from truly experiencing and proclaiming God’s living, loving, redeeming word - the gospel - the good news. This can be many things from church structure at all levels of the church - ELCA, Synod, and congregational levels; our worship services; our physical buildings; ourselves; and more. This is part of what the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church, that the last churchwide assembly created, will be looking at for the ELCA. How do we need to change, how do we need to reform ourselves, to keep the focus on God’s Living Word.

We can't use the excuse of "well, that's the way it has always been" as to why we shouldn't change. The church has changed a lot over the years, including if you think back to the start of the Christian church, it was focused a lot on community. Our second "C" for today. The start of the church was people gathering in each other's homes - sharing stories, sharing the Good News, coming together to help those in need. All this, not because they were told to or had to, but because they wanted to - they believed in the message of Christ, the Living Word, and came together in community to support each other and share that message. Over the years, the church became more structured, more hierarchical, more bureaucratic. I personally think that the church as a whole could learn a lot from going back to a community focused approach, much like I see in many aspects of our congregation. Our food pantries, our parish house for refugees, our various food drives, our quilts and kits for Lutheran World Relief, and more - they all show how we support our larger community.

However, we also support our own community. I am preaching today as part of community. This is another thing that Luther was all about - lay people getting involved in the word. Luther translated the bible into German so that people themselves could read the Bible and learn from it directly instead of having the priest be the go-between for them. In fact, when I was telling someone this past week that I would be giving the sermon today, they were a bit surprised, thinking that only a pastor could give the message. So Lutherans, and some other denominations, are still unique in that aspect,

that the message, the Living Word, belongs to everyone and can be shared by everyone.

The past week and upcoming weeks are a very strong example of how our own community support each other. As we continue to support and hold in prayer Pastor Ellen, Ken, and all of Dorothy's family - this community of Faith continues to come together to share our gifts with them, so that the work that needs to be done is shared. This happens over and over again in our congregation - with people rotating to share leading Sunday School, with Deb or Kathy stepping in to play when Bruce is gone, with Pastor John filling in for Pastor Ellen when she needs to take care of other matters. The church isn't the pastor, the church isn't the building, the church isn't any one person, the church is all of us coming together in community.

And this leads to the 3rd "C" - we gather in community to share our common confession. I'm not talking about confession as confession of sins - I'm talking about our confession of faith - what we deep down believe - the core of our faith and beliefs. Now many of our confessions are covered in the creeds, the one we are focusing on today is the confession that makes Lutherans Lutheran. The confession that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works. This was the core of what Luther found in his studies. There is no way to earn our way to Heaven, to be in God's good standing, since it is gift from God.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus say, "...you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." and the disciples, ever confused, asked, "What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Just like we often ask in the Lutheran tradition - "What does this mean?" So a story.

This past May I was on vacation using a rental car, and at one point, I backed the car into a larger truck which was not damaged, no one was hurt, and the only damage was part of the back end of the rental car was crunched a bit. Now, since this is church, I am being live streamed and recorded, and there are children present, I will not share what I said right after I had the accident. However, it was the feeling I had next that I want to share - I was consumed by this. I was trying to figure out what to do, what did I do wrong, how did I miss the truck, would this cost me any money, who do I need to report this to, where do I find a number to call, etc. I tried to focus on my visit with my family, but my mind kept getting drawn back to the accident and what I needed to do to make it right. I was certainly not free. I could hardly focus on anything else.

So, when the Gospel talks about being free, it isn't just in the physical captive sense, it can be our mental state and how we live our lives. And this is how it can be if we had to keep focusing on making sure we are "right" with God, that we have done everything to make sure we will be saved and make it to Heaven. It would be hard to focus on the community part of our faith, hard to focus on living our lives, if with everything we did we were worried about if this will please God and will we be rewarded or punished. We

would start having to add up and keep track of everything we did during the week to make sure we did enough. Now, based on how I felt after my accident, and the thought of tracking everything I do - that doesn't sound like a fun way of living.

This is the good news, we don't have to do that - we have been made free by the Son, by Jesus, by God's Living Word, as John says "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." - and the Son and God have made us free. And this isn't just a New Testament message. Our loving God is consistent through the Bible, always loving us and forgiving our sins because of God's commitment to us. As it says in our reading from Jeremiah today, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the lord,' for 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." Let's focus again on that last part, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Yes - our sins have been forgiven, not because we ask or do the right thing, but because it is God's will and God has already done it.

Our reading from Romans shares the same message, "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 gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Our sins are forgiven and remembered no more, not because of anything we do, but because it is a gift from God. We are forgiven, saved, justified, by our faith. Again from Romans, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

This would be a nice place to stop, but there is always that pesky question that remains. If we are justified by faith and not by works - then why should we or why do we do good works? We were just told that we aren't justified by our works, so why bother?

We should note that nothing says that good works and the law aren't important, it says that "works prescribed by the law" isn't what gets us into Heaven. As noted in Jeremiah the Lord says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The law, the urge to do good works, is part of who we are as Children of God, our very being. It is our calling to show our faith, show who we are as God's children, by working to live into the law, live into what brings forth God's kin-dom of love for all.

Back to my rental car this past May. Long story short, my insurance covered all of the damage, I paid nothing out of pocket, overall it was easy to deal with, and nothing bad happened. You could say all was forgiven. Had I known this would be the outcome, maybe I wouldn't have been so consumed by it when it happened, and could have felt more free in that situation. So, since in the end it all turned out OK, I could really go out and do it again and again, since I have the insurance and they'll take care of it, aka "forgive" me. (We'll ignore the part of my insurance premiums skyrocketing and then probably canceling coverage). But I won't purposefully go out and do it again, because I know it isn't the right thing to do, it doesn't provide benefit to people. I don't avoid

accidents because it helps me get further in life or gain me any favor, but it is simply the right thing to do, and is part of who I am - to be a safe driver and work to do everything right, not because I have to, but because I want to.

It is the same with good works - we don't do them to gain favor with God, we do them because it is part of who we are, part of having God's law being written in our hearts, part of our faith, our desire to bring forth God's kin-dom to all, part of our calling as people of God. We recognize that this can be a struggle at times, since while we strive to do good in the world, we know there is evil, the forces in the universe that draw us away from God's love and kin-dom - so we follow Jesus, not because we have to be perfect and do all the right things like Jesus did, but as an example, a role model, a reminder of the way God wants us to live into our faith and God's kin-dom.

Our church is changing and needs to continue to change, so we can focus on our community, and live into our confession of faith - the good news. The good news we are justified by grace through faith. Our sins are forgiven and remembered no more as gift from God and there is nothing we can or need to do to earn this favor. We are freed from focusing on ourselves and our sins, so that we can focus on bringing forth God's kin-dom into the world, yes - often by good works. We could simply not do any good works and we still receive God's gift of salvation, but is that the life you want to live? I leave you with this question to ponder for the week, "Why do you do good works, when you aren't required to?" Amen.