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The Festival of the Reformation

October 26, 2014

Text: John 8:31–36

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The countdown is well underway. Plans are in the making. This year, October 31, marks the 497<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. In 3 years, Protestant Christians will engage in a year-long celebration of the Reformation. One doesn't plan a 500<sup>th</sup> celebration of a history-changing event over night. Events, lectures, tours, books, articles, TV specials, and grand concerts must be planned and organized. The next two Reformation Sundays will be warm-ups for the big one in 2017, the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

One wonders what Martin Luther would say about all the fuss. When asked about his role in the Reformation, Luther famously said that “I was asleep or drinking beer with Phillip Melancthon or Amsdorf while the Word of God did everything. I did nothing.” Regarding himself, his name, and his significance, Luther once called himself a “poor stinking bag of maggots.” Luther was never afraid to express himself with a colorful phrase or two. You see, the heart and soul of Luther's Reformation work was the primacy of Christ's gospel in the life of each and every Christian and each and every Christian congregation.

“God's Word should be celebrated in all its true and purity” is what I think Luther might say about these things. Don't worry about the posting of theses on church doors, or dramatic confrontations with religious and political leaders. What's truly worthy celebrating is Christ's eternal Gospel. Hear the good news that sinners are set free from sin and death through Christ's holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. Rejoice in your baptism whereby you received forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. Receive Holy Communion for it's the gospel in a nutshell: Christ's body and blood given for the forgiveness and sins, life, and salvation to all who receive it in faith and trust. Don't neglect the holy absolution where particular sins are particularly forgiven as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself. Remain faithful to Christ's congregation where He daily and richly forgives your sins and the sins of all believers. Cling to prayer for God the

Father tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children. Something like that is what I think Luther might say about anniversary celebrations of the Reformation.

Look to Jesus, Luther would say. He's the one who sets you free. For that is, in fact, what the Lord told a group of Jews according to John 8:31–32, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." True freedom comes from abiding in Christ's word. Notice that word: abiding. It speaks of continually living in what Christ has said. There's no such thing as a Christian occasionally living in the truth of God's Word. Freedom is found in continually living in God's Word as your choicest treasure, the very foundation of your present and future hopes.

Abiding in Christ's word begins with baptism. Through water administered in God's Trinitarian name, we are united to Jesus' death and His eternal resurrection life. In baptism, we are made living members of Christ's Holy Church having been washed by that life-giving water. After His resurrection, Jesus instructed His Church that disciples are to be made of all nations, from the youngest to the oldest, by baptizing them in His name and teaching them His holy Word. Abiding in Jesus' Word means abiding in His gracious baptism.

To abide in Christ's Word means to hear His Word faithfully and regularly. And to hear it, we must have preachers who proclaim it and teach it in all its truth and purity. According to Matthew 10, Jesus sent out the 12 disciples to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. Our Lord told them that "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (vs. 40). Receiving Christ with all the Gospel gift He desires to give means hearing His Word of forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation. Luther constantly supported and encouraged the preaching of God's Word in Christian congregations. He once said that every Church is a "mouthhouse for the forgiveness of sins."

To abide in Christ's Word means to gather wherever His Word is taught in its truth and purity. For Jesus and the New Testament, that means the Church, the congregation gathered regularly around preaching and sacraments. Our dear Lord boldly promised that the gates of hell shall never prevail against His beloved Church (Mt. 16:18). There's a good deal of writing and debating taking place among pastors and theologians about the nature of the Church. This is good and healthy, generally speaking. But we must never forget that the organizational structure of the Church is

really pretty simple: preachers and hearers gathered around Christ's Word and Sacraments. "Even a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA XII:2) wrote Luther. The preaching and hearing of God's Word in its truth and purity is the legacy of the New Testament and the Lutheran Church.

And we might pause a moment and ask what should be heard in any given congregational worship service. If we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd, what message does He give? St. Paul tells us beautifully and powerfully in today's epistle reading, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23–24). The Lord Jesus and His blessed apostles don't tiptoe around the central issue with which we must come to terms. Every man, woman, and child is held in bondage to sin and death, no exceptions.

When Jesus told the Jews that hard message in today's gospel reading, the Jews reacted with outrage. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'? (vs. 33)" In other words, we've got the right birth certificate. We're of the physical lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and that should do the trick. Their sin was that they feared, loved, and trusted in their ancestry instead of God who calls people to faith and trust like He did with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutherans need to be very cautious about not following this deadly example. Martin Luther is our forefather in the faith. We're his offspring and we've never been enslaved to any kind of false doctrine here. This congregation is 106/98 years old and we've never tolerated any kind of false doctrine. And besides, I've been baptized and confirmed into the Lutheran Church. I've got my certificates to prove it. Even memorized Luther's Small Catechism and recited it in front of the congregation. I don't know who you're talking about Jesus but I've never been in bondage.

But Jesus tells those 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews and us 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians that "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (vs. 34). That's the hard truth. Without Jesus, we are slaves to sin. St. Paul calls unbelievers "children of wrath" in Ephesians 2 and vessels of God's judgment prepared for destruction in Romans 9. That's the state that disobedience to God's Word and will leaves us.

But God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would not abandon us nor leave us to judgment and death. The Father gives His beloved Son to us, to you and me, as a Savior from wrath, judgment and bondage from sin and death. Jesus, the Son of the Father, embraces you in His death and resurrection so that you can be declared righteous and beloved children and heirs in His Father's sight. The Holy Spirit sanctifies you by His on-going presence.

Is it any wonder then why we baptize in God's Trinitarian name!! Or why we pray to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit?

You see, that's the hard-hitting good news that Jesus gave to those 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, to those 16<sup>th</sup> century Lutherans; it's the glorious message our Lord continues to give to us 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutherans. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Freedom from sin and death and wrath and judgment and guilt and shame and fear and any other evil.

This 497<sup>th</sup> celebration of the Reformation is first and foremost a celebration of Christ's Word in all its power, truth, and beauty. We honor our forefathers and foremothers in the faith. We draw strength and encouragement from their godly example of faithfulness and perseverance. But Jesus remains at the heart and center. Through His Gospel gifts we are free-born disciples. The days of slavery to sin are over. The Son has set you free. And if Jesus sets you free, you are free indeed.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.