

Today I also want to consider this text from Luke, chapter 18, the assigned text for this Sunday: *9 [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

15 Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 17 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

This is the word of the Lord.

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we, along with many Lutherans, are celebrating the Festival of the Reformation, although informed Lutherans know the actual date for the festival is October 31st. On that day, now 502 years ago, in 1517, the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses—statements of debate—to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, thus beginning what historians call the Protestant Reformation.

We recall this event and others of the Reformation each year, and two years ago, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with much fanfare and many activities. Do you get tired of it? Or maybe you take some pride in it. Actually, I hope that neither is so.

In our remembering, we can give thanks to God for what He did for His Church those many years ago, for we are the spiritual descendants of the brave reformers. But we have no reason to take pride in anything Luther or others did. Luther didn't. Luther ascribed the power to the Word of God. Luther preached to the zealous Wittenbergers in March of 1522, speaking of that word: “the Word created heaven and earth and all things [Ps. 33:6]; the Word must do this thing [this work of Reformation], and not we poor sinners.

“In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example.

I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it.

“I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool's play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work” (*Luther's Works*, 51:77-78).

Yes, Luther says, “I opposed indulgences.” That's what the 95 Theses were about. They were a “Disputation ... on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,” but indeed they dealt broadly with the whole penitential system of Rome—with doing penance and adoring relics and buying indulgences and escaping purgatory. Again Luther says, “I opposed ... all the papists,” including the Pope. With a bit of sarcasm Luther wrote in thesis 81, “Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial.” I'm sure that with such sarcasm Luther did not ingratiate himself with the Pope.

Nevertheless, Luther was on to something with these theses. He had figured out that there was something wrong in the church, but opposing something doesn't make one a reformer. He needed to figure out what was right. And he was starting to. Stuck in the middle of the theses were these two (62 and 63): “The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.” And “But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last.”

That was the reform the church needed, not just to turn away from abuses—penance and indulgences and purgatory—but to turn back to the Gospel. Therefore, this “Most Holy Gospel” was truly at the heart of the Reformation; but what is that?

The Gospel is the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is that unrighteous sinners are considered righteous before God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, not because of our works. This is the way St. Paul says it in our Epistle: “*by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*” Rather, sinners “*are justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [atoning sacrifice] by his blood, to be received by faith.*” The Gospel is the message of the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus's shed

blood, applied to sinners when they come to trust God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. *"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."*

This was the issue of the Reformation — our justification. The tax collector went home *"justified,"* Jesus said, not the Pharisee. The tax collector admitted he was a sinner, and sought God's grace and mercy and forgiveness; the Pharisee *"trusted in [himself] that [he was] righteous"* by his striving to keep the law.

This was the issue with Rome — how are sinners considered righteous before God; how are sinners forgiven? St. Paul taught that it's God's gift to sinners received by faith alone (without works). Rome objected to Luther's insertion of "alone" in that verse 28 of Romans 3. You can read in your insert how Luther defended it. But more, Rome rejected this Biblical understanding of our justification and officially condemned those who taught this Gospel.

To be sure, this doctrine can rub us the wrong way. Like the Pharisee, we don't like that our fasting doesn't count toward our salvation, that our tithes don't merit salvation all on their own, that our striving to keep the law isn't worthy of our salvation. We don't like that this doctrine exalts the tax collector and condemns the Pharisee. Of course, we don't. Luther said "this treasure is naturally most odious." It "makes the first to be last." It calls upon us to humble ourselves. It calls upon us to receive the kingdom as a little child, looking to Jesus, trusting in His cross and resurrection, rejoicing that we are covered in the blood that cleanses us from all our sins, that in this way, the kingdom of God is ours.

The Reformation was about the Gospel. The Gospel is a message, a word, a powerful word of the righteousness that God bestows on those who believe in Christ. And to believe the message, you have to hear message, as St. Paul testifies: *"faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ,"* or as Jesus Himself taught, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

The Reformation is still about the Gospel: whether it's the word of Christ you hear preached, or His word that you read, or the "water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (Small Catechism, Baptism), or the word of absolution you hear from your pastor, or the words of promise in the Sacrament: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" (Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar), keep it close. Abide in it. Believe what it tells you. You are justified by faith in Christ alone. Look to Jesus alone for your salvation, for when it comes to that, too, you do nothing; the Word does everything.

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