

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today is the Festival of the Reformation, a festival that could be considered the most sectarian in our calendar. After all, the Roman Catholics don't celebrate it — though Pope Francis did go to Sweden in 2016 and commemorated the Reformation there at Lund Cathedral. A quick google search for congregations celebrating a reformation service returned mostly Lutheran churches. There were a few Reformed churches that celebrated it, but not many. You might recall that I went to a Presbyterian College in Arkansas, and neither the college nor the local Presbyterian Church celebrated it that I recall. Nor any other church in town. We tend not to have the big circuit or city-wide celebrations we once did, but the Reformation is still a big thing to us and to Lutherans around the world.

There is always a bit of a historical flavor to the celebration. After all, the festival is really October 31, the Eve of All Saints day, and you recall that on that day in 1517, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses up on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Historians count that as the start of the Reformation, a period that extended to about 1600, though Lutherans might mark its end with the publishing of the Book of Concord in 1580.

There were significant events throughout that period: Luther standing before Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire announcing that he would not recant his writing unless he could be convinced of his error by the Scripture or just plain reason; Luther being “spirited away” to the Wartburg Castle for protection; the German princes refusing to give up the Reformation truth and offering their heads in protest — it's how the term Protestant came into being; Luther's writing of the catechisms; the Confession of the Augsburg Confession and its Defense. With the death of Luther in 1546, a number of controversies flared up, which were not settled until the Formula of Concord in 1577.

It was an important time in the Church, and much of it revolved around the Reformer Martin Luther. Our church bears his name; we confess his theology. We teach his catechism here and at our school. I think that's the reason one of our seventh graders challenged me ... “Why do you talk so much about Luther?” The question took me aback. “Do we,” I wondered? I did a quick mental survey, and I was confused until I thought about the fact that we teach from Luther's Small Catechism every week. It's there that the students hear of Luther's explanation of the six chief parts of Christian doctrine.

In church, too ... I often include a phrase here and there from the catechism. I hope you hear and recognize those — but the catechism isn't about Luther. We sing hymns written by Luther; like today, we just sang “A Mighty Fortress”; but they're not about Luther either. Of course, today we've heard a bit of history of the

Reformation in which Luther is a central figure, and as an historical figure Luther is remembered for restoring the pure Gospel to the Church, but never is Luther the subject or the object of what we preach.

Jesus is the subject. Jesus Christ alone is our Savior from sin and death and the devil. He alone was righteous. We're not. We cannot escape from the devastating universality of St. Paul's "*all*" in our Epistle — "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" meaning you have sinned; I have sinned. We do not meet God's perfect standard. A bit earlier in Romans 3 also, we find that universal standard that destroys our every pretense of righteousness: "*None is righteous, no, not one; ... All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one*" (Rom. 3:10-12). And so, we preach that Jesus' redemption alone was the sufficient ransom for our sin. *Solus Christus!*

The cross is also the subject, for "*the word of the cross is ... to us who are being saved ... the power of God*" (1 Cor. 1:18). "*We preach Christ crucified*" (1 Cor. 1:23), as Paul teaches. Jesus' sacrifice is the only death that could propitiate God's righteous wrath for sin. This is the Gospel that Luther restored, saying: "The cross alone is our theology" (lutheranreformation.org/theology/cross-alone-theology).

Grace is the subject of our preaching. Grace is the language of gift, and again this destroys our every attempt to take credit for our own salvation. Gift means not by our efforts. St. Paul says again in our Epistle: all "*are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" And Paul's well known saying in Ephesians speaks similarly: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9). Again, in our Epistle: "*by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*" Our salvation is by grace alone! *Sola gratia!* As St. Paul says in Romans 11: "*if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace*" (Rom. 11:6).

Faith is the subject of our preaching, although we don't want to misunderstand that. Faith is the hand that receives the gifts of God. St. Paul says in our Epistle that we "*are justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... to be received by faith.*" That is, the salvation that Jesus won by His cross is made our own when we believe that He did it *for us*. "Who *for us men and for our salvation* came down from heaven And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, And was made man; And was crucified also *for us* under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures; And ascended into heaven, And sits at the right hand of the Father ..." (Nicene Creed). Believe this, Paul says, and you are reckoned righteous before God: "*to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness*" (Rom. 4:5). Again, "*It will be counted to us who believe*

in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25).

Yes, we preach faith, holding with St. Paul *“that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Sola fide!* Faith alone! Here we stand with thanks to Luther, even though we are condemned by Rome for this Biblical truth. They still say: “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.”

The Word is the content of our preaching ... thinking of the Word made flesh and the words spoken by Him and given to us by poets and prophets, apostles and evangelists. *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth”* Our own Bill Weinrich says of this *“‘Word’ of Jesus in which the disciple must remain”*: it is *“the Word of Jesus concerning his own person and work” (Concordia Commentary: John 7:2-12:50, p. 134).* He is the Word made flesh; He is the I AM — the LORD — who would be lifted up unto death for the sins of the world. Scripture bears witness to this Jesus, as Jesus Himself taught: *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).* *Sola Scriptura!*

This word leads us into the truth — not any word, but Jesus’ own words and the words about Jesus. This word proclaims to you the forgiveness of your sins — received by faith. Forgiveness brings peace. It sets you free from the condemnation of the law. It gives you hope of everlasting life.

This is Reformation theology. This is what Martin Luther helped restore to the church. This is why on Reformation we talk a bit about him, but why week in and week out regardless what Scripture we’re considering, we preach that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and [that all] are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”* We preach *“that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Sola Scriptura! Sola gratia! Sola fide! Solus Christus!*

This is our Reformation heritage. Perhaps the festival is a bit sectarian, but Reformation theology is not. It is the Gospel that saves. May we never take it for granted.

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