

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation. It's kind of a peculiarly Lutheran thing to do, it seems to me. Other church bodies, even Roman Catholics, will acknowledge the contributions to the faith made by Martin Luther and the Reformation. They might teach the historical details of the Reformation. But I don't know how many, other than Lutherans, celebrate the day as a church festival. It could come across as a bit sectarian, a time to celebrate our German heritage with sauerkraut, brats, and beer.

But look around you. We're not just "*that foreign church*" as some of the people in Batesville, AR, called us Lutherans when Marge and I lived there. We're not just "*that big, white church*" on the corner of Hanna and Creighton.

Our beginning, to be sure, happened in Wittenberg, Germany, when Martin Luther, unhappy about the abuses in the Roman Catholic Church, famously nailed the 95 theses up on the Castle Church door. These statements, though not meant specifically as a protest but as a call to reform, became the tinder for protest. If you call yourself Protestant, it began there in Germany, October 31, 1517.

And, to be sure, you can think of the Reformation as a purely historical event with persons and places, actions and reactions, with dates to remember. But that's not really what the Reformation is about. It's not really about Martin Luther, Castle Churches, Wittenberg, or Germany. It's not really about Theses and hammer blows and papal bulls. Focusing on those things is like focusing on the pebble that loosed a landslide. It's really about Jesus and His church from Wittenberg to Fort Wayne, from Scandinavia to Zimbabwe.

And if all we as Lutherans only remember the historical and geographical details of the Reformation, then we have become exactly what the folks down in Batesville, AR, accused Lutherans of being, or what some in our neighborhood want to call us. But it's not about that, and neither are we.

Indeed, the significance of the Reformation is really theological. And, therefore, our Reformation vocabulary is not Germany, sauerkraut, brats or beer. It's not even Wittenberg, Luther, Castle Church, or 95 theses. Rather it's word, discipleship, truth, freedom, the Son. It's Jesus Christ, justification, sin, law, faith, righteousness, grace, redemption, and propitiation. This is the vocabulary of the Reformation.

The Reformation is all about these things, these words contained in our Scripture texts for today, and if you distill it all down to a word not in these texts, but one that gets to the point, it's forgiveness. The Reformation is really all about how a sinner stands forgiven before God.

There are certainly bigger words associated with the Reformation — like justification—and that one is surely important. You may remember that the doctrine of justification is, as we confess it, the article upon which the church stands or falls. It is the “*theological fault line*” dividing the Roman Catholics from the Lutherans during the Reformation and to this day. But what does that really mean except that you are forgiven of all your sins by God’s gracious favor toward you for the sake of Jesus, that you are reckoned righteous by Jesus’ blood received by faith alone. Grace alone and faith alone.

St. Paul in our epistle said, “*We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*” Luther scribbled “*alone*” in the margin and some complained that he was adding to the Scripture, but what else could “*apart from the works of the law*” mean? Again, St. Paul: “*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.*” It’s really quite simple, isn’t it? You are forgiven by grace alone and faith alone — these two mottos of the Reformation.

Rome rejected this Biblical understanding. They condemned Lutherans and anyone else that taught that (Canon 9) “*the sinner is justified by faith alone,*” and that we do not cooperate with Him or add our own merits to effect our salvation. They condemned Lutherans and anyone who taught that (Canon 11) “*men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, [there’s forgiveness] ... or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God....*” They condemned Lutherans and anyone who taught (Canon 14) “*that man is absolved from his sins and justified [there it is again — forgiveness] because he firmly believes*” it, and “*that by this faith alone absolution and justification are effected.*”

These condemnations come from the Council of Trent, and they say that Rome condemns you because of what the Scriptures teach, because of what we preach, because of what you believe. Justified by grace alone through faith alone as testified to by Scripture alone. And you heard it. Rome understood that this justification meant forgiveness—they connected it up, and they were right about that. The Reformation is all about forgiveness. It’s about being set free by the Son.

It’s about being set free from the condemnation of the law, which we rightly deserve because of our sins. The Reformation is about being set free by the atoning sacrifice of the Son, a spotless Lamb slaughtered for our sins, by His blood shed for our redemption. It’s about being set free **on earth** by the Son of God who humbled Himself taking on our flesh and making Himself a servant. It’s about being set free **in heaven** by the Son, Jesus Christ, who rose from death victorious

over sin, and ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand and mediate for mankind.

The Reformation is about being set free, not by overlooking our sin (God is just; He can't do that. Law breaking demands punishment), but by punishing sin in the Son, putting Him "*forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*" There's another big word of the Reformation: propitiation. It just means that God's just anger over our sin has been appeased, and it happened by the loving act of His Son. The Reformation is about being set free by taking all our sins and putting them on the perfect scapegoat—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One—and sending them away into the wilderness; "*as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*"

The Reformation is about being set free not by necessity but by His grace—God is kindly disposed to us, though we deserve nothing but punishment, and we have done nothing to merit this favor. Yet His grace is still apparent today—the benefits of Christ are bestowed here and now. In the font—set free by the mercy found in water and word pouring over you, your sins washed away—forgiveness. In the absolution spoken to you—absolution: that's just another word for forgiveness. Forgiveness is freedom! In the body and blood of Jesus Christ—the goodness of the Lord tasted with your mouths—given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. And you depart in peace. Set free here on earth. Set free in heaven. Set free by the Son, and if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

This is most certainly true—not because I say it, or even because Luther said it, but because God Himself says it to you. Word, discipleship, truth, freedom, the Son, Jesus Christ, justification, sin, law, faith, righteousness, grace, redemption, propitiation—FORGIVENESS. These are the words to know—words of the Reformation—the words of God that endure forever.

And speaking of forgiveness, maybe we Lutherans can be forgiven today for reveling a bit in our Reformation heritage and taking a bit of pride in our Lutheran forebears—at least, as we give thanks to God for their courage, for by that courage, the Gospel has been restored to us. By their courage we are not burdened down with a futile striving after salvation by our own works, but we are able to revel and rejoice in the freedom that is ours in the Son, in the forgiveness of our sins—forgiveness, life, salvation.

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