

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

You've been asleep if you don't know that this year we are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation, whose beginning historians mark by Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Rest assured, though, this reformation sermon will not be 500 times longer than usual, nor, I can guarantee, will it be 500 times better. I pray you will hear Christ and grace and faith and Word. I pray you will hear forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, for these are the things that we as Christians celebrate always, but the Reformation focus is especially on these things.

But not everyone is keen about celebrating the Reformation, and we can understand why, namely the divisions that resulted from the Reformation. Especially after the genteel way that Dr. Larry Brennan talked to us as week ago Saturday, it can be shocking to hear the accusations and recriminations and detestations that still are spewed from many Roman Catholics toward Luther and Lutherans. Yes, thankfully, there are not the retaliations today that were such a part of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but the wounds of division are still there.

Thus, we can understand why for some, celebration is not the right word to be used. After all, we don't celebrate a divorce. It may be necessary. It may be justified. It may even be beneficial. But it is not a time to celebrate. Man is separating what God had joined together.

Therefore, it's important to remind ourselves that as we celebrate the Reformation, we are not celebrating division in the church, even as do not gather here to celebrate our brokenness. But we do gather to acknowledge it — our brokenness, our sin — and to lament it. We gather here to acknowledge that we are Adam's offspring, born in his image, sinful by nature, accountable before God, and therefore with the sentence of death hanging over us. We gather to acknowledge and lament that because of this original corruption and disease that afflicts us, we sin — *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”*; we transgress God's law and we *“justly deserve [God's] temporal and eternal punishment”* — as St. Paul says, *“the wages of sin is death”* (Rom. 6:23), and again, *“death spread to all men because all sinned”* (Rom. 5:12). We lament our sin and we repent of them as people whose whole lives are ones of repentance (Luther, Thesis 1).

For we do celebrate the Reformation, unashamed of the Gospel that was unbound by it, rejoicing that the power of God for our salvation was loosed on its free course and could be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people.

We celebrate the Reformation, rejoicing that the pure message of our salvation was able to be proclaimed again: that God loved us sinners in just this way — that

He sent His own Son down from heaven into our flesh, so that He might be lifted up on the cross to die for our sins, to forgive us, to set us free from guilt and condemnation, to give us everlasting life.

We celebrate the Reformation, rejoicing in the message that God’s salvation is free to us is clearly being preached again. The Bible calls it “grace” — *“his grace as a gift.”* Of course, this gift cost God dearly—it cost the Father His beloved Son whom He gave as a gift out of His great love. It cost the Son His life—not taken from Him, but given up freely for you. God’s grace is your redemption in Christ Jesus, *“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.”*

We celebrate the Reformation, rejoicing in the gift of faith that receives God’s gifts of grace, for this is how the blessings of Christ’s atoning sacrifice are made our own. As we confess, “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” That is, “God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight” (Augsburg Confession, IV:2-3). Thus, we hear St. Paul again in our Epistle tell us that we are *“justified by his 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.”* And we hear that it is *“by grace [that we] have been saved through faith. And this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God.”* And we hear that the Gospel *“is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, ... [for] in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”*

Of course, this message was not so clearly preached back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when a man named Martin Luther was struggling with God, when he was looking for a gracious God. Luther describes his own struggle with that phrase we have heard several times today, in Romans 3 and in Romans 1: *“the righteousness of God.”*

In fact, Luther admits, he hated that term. He knew that God was righteous and holy and just. And Luther knew that he was not. Luther knew the just response of a righteous God to a wretched sinner like he was — like we are. Again, it’s what we say in our confession of sins: we “justly deserve [God’s] temporal and eternal punishment.” Luther’s church kept telling him to do more, but Luther knew that “doing what [was] in him [only added] sin to sin so that he [became] doubly guilty” (Heidelberg Disputation, 16). That’s why Luther struggled with God: because He knew that salvation by the law, by his doing was never done (Heidelberg Disputation, 26).

But Luther went to the right place in his wrestling with God — to the Scriptures themselves, and so he came to know the wonderful Gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus as he was reading Romans 1. Remember, it talks about the *“righteousness of God.”*

Luther describes his so-called tower experience as he pondered “*the righteousness of God*” in Romans. He wrote, “I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.”’ I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i. e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’ All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e. g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, ‘the justice of God,’ with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.”

Luther came to realize that although we deserve punishment, we are not punished, for God is a gracious God because of Christ Jesus. We are not punished because of His cross and resurrection. We are not punished because we have received God’s grace — by water and the word that washes away sins, by the word of forgiveness proclaimed, by the body and blood of Jesus that we get to eat and drink, “given and shed for [us] for the forgiveness of [our] sins.”

Luther came to understand God’s grace: that the person “is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (Heidelberg Disputation, 25); that when it comes to our salvation, “grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done” (Heidelberg Disputation, 26).

This is what we celebrate on Reformation, not division but the great news of our salvation in Jesus Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone. This is the faith that André and Christian have been taught, and this is what they are confessing today. It’s something worth celebrating.

But it’s also worth praying that the sad divisions in the Church may also be healed. As so we pray, “O come, Desire of nations, bind In one the hearts of all mankind; Bid Thou our sad divisions cease, And be Thyself our King of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel” (LSB357:7).

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