

Reformation Sunday
October 26, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Word Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...

I'm sure you recognize these words from our own Declaration of Independence. This is, of course, one of the greatest protest documents in all of political history. From the outset, the founders set out to explain exactly what they were protesting against. This document became the launching platform for what is one of the greatest experiments in democracy in all of world history.

Today we gather to commemorate the start of the greatest protest movement in all of Christian history. It was nearly 491 years ago, on October 31, 1517, that

Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany.

Martin Luther had no idea, I'm sure, what a powderkeg he was about to light. He was following what was standard practice for beginning a scholarly debate in his time. The practice was to examine the notion with which one had a dispute, and post a series of statements discussing that notion. By posting these statements a person was inviting others into the discussion.

This was Martin Luther's aim: To invite others into discussion on the topic of papal indulgences. There is no doubt that he was seeking to reform the church in raising this discussion. However, it was never his intent to create schism in the church.

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Martin Luther's path to this fateful day was one from fear and wrath to the discovery of God's love and grace. He came from humble means. His father was a hard-working man who hoped for greater things from his son. Hans Luder scraped together the means to send his son to the University of Erfurt with the hope of Martin becoming a lawyer. After graduating with his master's degree in 1505 Martin immediately enrolled in law school at Erfurt.

On his way back to the University following a visit home in July 1505 Martin suddenly found himself in the midst of a terrible thunderstorm. When lightning struck very near him he became terrified of death and divine judgment. He cried out, "Help, Saint Anna! I will become a monk!" Martin was spared that night, and true to his word, upon returning to Erfurt he sold all his law books, quit the University, and entered an Augustinian monastery.

It was this strange turn of events that changed Martin Luther's life, and indeed, has direct consequences on all of us here today. Throughout his life in the church and his study of philosophy, Martin Luther saw only a God of wrath and judgement. He found no comfort in the practice of his religion. It is said that, even as a monk, Luther was fastidious in his practice of the mass because he feared God's wrath if he should make even one small mistake.

Recognizing that this way of life was having dire consequences on Brother Martin's well-being, his superior ordered Brother Martin back to the University in the hope that he would stop being so introspective. In 1508 Brother Martin began teaching at the University of Wittenburg and in 1512 was accepted into the theological faculty as a Doctor of the Bible.

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It was while he was at the University of Wittenburg that Brother Martin had his great theological break-through. In his studies of the letter of Paul to the Romans Luther finally found peace with God. At last, he understood that God is not a wrathful judge, but a loving God who seeks to pull all humanity closer to Himself.

In the first two chapters of his letter, Paul outlines the dire situation of humanity being bound in sin and unable to free itself. Those who are bound in sin will, indeed, find themselves falling under the righteous judgment of God. And, according to Paul, since all have sinned all deserve the righteous judgment of God. As he says in chapter 3 verse 20, “No human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

But suddenly, in the following verses, Paul makes a radical turn. Borrowing the language of the law courts Paul explains that through faith in Jesus Christ the penalty due our sin under the law has been set aside. We are no longer considered guilty, but freed from judgment.

Furthermore, Paul explains that those whose penalty has been set aside are “redeemed.” Once again borrowing a metaphor from his time, he likens those who are bound in sin to slaves, those who can be bought – or “redeemed” – at a price. The price at which we have all be redeemed is the death of Jesus Christ.

And finally, Paul borrows another metaphor, this time from the practices in the temple in Jerusalem. He likens Jesus to the sacrificial animals whose blood was spread across the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies on that most holy day of the Jewish year, the Day of Atonement. Paul says that Jesus is the one who atoned for our sins so that we might be declared righteous and redeemed from the God's righteous judgment.

This discovery led Dr. Luther to the realization that there is nothing we humans need do in order to win God's favor. The price has already been paid, by Jesus Christ dying on the cross. It is only by God's grace that we are saved, through faith in Jesus Christ. The Word who is Jesus Christ, faith in the saving work of Jesus, and the grace which God offers all people through faith in this saving work of Christ. Word alone, faith alone, grace alone.

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The founders of this country, in their Declaration of Independence, sought to cast off the shackles of oppression. Similarly, in his invitation for others to join the discussion of indulgences in the 95 Theses, Dr. Luther sought to have people cast off the chains of oppression which had crept into the church. He taught that the purchase of indulgences was a foolish faith in man's ability to win favor with God. As he states in #36: "Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of

penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.” He continues in #37: “Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.”

There is nothing we need do – in fact, there is nothing we *CAN* do – to win or merit God’s gracious favor other than to believe that Christ is who he says he is: The Son of God who takes away the sin of the world. As our Gospel reading today reminds us: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” As Dr. Martin says in Thesis #62: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” Word alone, faith alone, grace alone.

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When the founders of this country issued their Declaration of Independence, that battle was just beginning. It took the revolutionaries eight years to win their independence from Britain. But in one swift action, Martin Luther won for us the freeing of the Gospel from the tyranny of oppression, freeing Christians to fly into the arms of a loving God.

And lest I be misunderstood, I don’t hold any ill will against the Roman Catholic church for its state of affairs when Martin Luther appeared upon the scene. It’s simple human nature to fall into thinking that we must **DO** something to merit

God's favor. After all, we work hard in every other sphere of our lives in order to achieve the things we want and need. Why not the same with God?

This is the radical nature of the Gospel. This the radical nature of the Gospel that Martin Luther opened up to us. There is nothing we can do, by our own will, to merit favor with God. Word alone, faith alone, grace alone.

There is no other religious system in all of human history, at least of which I'm aware, that is pure gift. Ours is the only faith that says we can do nothing but be grateful recipients of what God has already done for us. You can't make this stuff up. The Gospel is so radically different, it goes so against the grain of human nature, that this is why we need to come to church Sunday after Sunday, week after week, to be reminded – lest we, too, slip into our old ways of thinking.

Word alone, faith alone, grace alone. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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