

This Sunday's texts:

Revelation 14:6-7

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

**Justified Freely
Pastor Jim Cords
October 31, 2021**

The holy Gospel according to John, the eighth chapter:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, help us to know your grace and love in transformative ways this day. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Reformation Sunday. It's a bit of a struggle today because our culture does not recognize today as Reformation Sunday. They recognize it as Halloween. Halloween, of course, gets its name from All Hallows Eve which means the eve before All Saints Day, but they stole it. We're not going to try to claim it back. We're going to claim today as Reformation Sunday.

I have heard friends and colleagues say that reformation of the church is an ongoing process that the church is always reforming. I think that is absolutely true, but what I want to suggest to you today as we think about Reformation Sunday and what this means in the life of our church, especially as a Lutheran Church is that reformation and progression are not the same things. It is not Progressing Sunday. It's not about the church making progress. Even though the truth of the Reformation is the beginning of the Enlightenment in our history, even though we want to constantly ask the question how can the church and the gospel be presented in a yet more relevant way so that the people around us hear and know the gospel, in truth, Luther was not seeking to progress the church in the Reformation. He was rather seeking to bring it back, to bring it back to the truth of God's word, to readjust the practices and the traditions of the church at that time, to bring them back in alignment with scripture. Not so different than many of the

writings of the Apostle Paul who wrote to the churches to try to realign them back to the truth of the gospel that had been proclaimed to them, when false teachers were trying to lead them astray in one way or another.

A big part of the beginning of the Reformation was a movement in the life of the church to raise money by the sale of indulgences. They were selling indulgences so that they could build St. Peter's Cathedral. They were encouraging all the people to give an offering and in exchange for that offering, they could get years off in purgatory. Then at the time of Luther, in that particular part of the Reformation, there was a man by the name of Tetzl. He was saying things like this "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." So it wasn't just, well, you decide how much you're going to give and then we'll decide how many years off or how many days off you get out of purgatory. Now many people think that Luther protested this, that Luther and the Reformation sprung up because they didn't think the church had the right to do this. But here's the truth. Luther went back to the scripture to try to see how it was that the church could say to people we can absolve you of your sins so that you would be purified. What he found there was that in fact, the church held the office of the keys. In fact, the church had the ability to forgive people, so he wasn't complaining that they had no right to do this. He was simply asking why would you ask them to give you money to do that. If, in the authority of Jesus, we have the ability to forgive people, why would we simply not forgive them? Freely, we have received. Freely, we give. He saw the torment the people were under and he said that the church is wielding its power in the wrong way and instead we should be offering forgiveness as we have received it.

In our gospel today, it says "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."¹ The proclamation of the Gospel is to lift the burden of sin off of God's people, to lift the burden of guilt off of God's people, to lift the burden of striving to accomplish enough good so that God would indeed forgive us. It bothers me in the church today and I know it's not just Lutherans. I've heard Catholics and Presbyterians say it is well. Have you ever heard the phrase "good old Lutheran guilt?" Anybody ever heard that? I'm glad there are fewer hands up today than normal.

¹ John 8:32

That is wonderful because we ought not to have guilt in Christ. We ought to know that the gospel proclamation is a gospel of complete forgiveness.

Here's the truth of what was happening in Luther's day, in that Reformation period. They were distinguishing between sin, original sin of the world, and sins. They were suggesting that, yes, Jesus died for the sin of the world, but that we needed purification from our sins. The role of purgatory was not hell, but rather to purge us, to make us holy and clean of our sins. So the declaration of Luther, the declaration of the church is that we are forgiven and made new.

I want to back up a step to remind us of this incredibly rich heritage that is ours in Lutheranism, that is ours in Protestantism. It is this heritage of recognizing the greatness of the word of God. The word of God is the authority from which we proclaim forgiveness and the gospel. The authority of the word of God is where we anchor our understanding of what is true, what is right, and what is good. When the church of Christ has occasionally begun to veer, the word of God is used to bring us back. That was at the heart of how God used Luther in the Protestant Reformation. I remind you of this scripture in 2 Timothy. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, [and then the words we don't like] rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."² Not good work to earn heaven, but good work to bless the world in Christ's name.

We also have in this Reformation history this great hymn that we sang with the choir this morning. Even if with unfamiliar words, if you go back and study those words, they were actually marvelous words. If not old in construction, they were deep and beautiful in teaching the idea that God is our defender. God is our defender from the woes and the struggles that the world will throw at us. God is our defender against even our own conscience, our own guilt. The devil and any wickedness will not have sway over us because we have a God who defends us, a Christ who gave his life for us. That is our assurance. That is our hope. That is a proclamation that can conquer our fears as we put our trust in him. "God is [indeed] our refuge and strength, [indeed] a very present help in trouble."³ So over these last 18 months, when we felt the trouble of the pandemic, when there were weeks that went by that we were not able to gather together and worship as God's people, we felt like the gospel was being robbed from us at some point. Yet in

² 2Timothy 3:16-17

³ Psalm 46:1

deeper faith, in deeper understanding, we all knew, didn't we? That God was still with us. We all knew, didn't we? That we were still worshipping the living God, even if we weren't gathered in a church building. Some actually even believed that we worshipped God together when we gathered out in the parking lot. Yes, thank you. That was a joke. I was hoping for a laugh. I knew I could count on you.

The foundational truths of discovery that Luther dug into and became foundational to the Reformation have to do with these five fundamental truths:

Sola scriptura
Sola gratia
Sola fide
Sola Christus
Soli Deo gloria

They have been at the heart of our Lutheran understanding from the beginning. Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, and glory to God alone. Those have been guiding principles. So that if by some strange occurrence, your life demonstrates, like our young boy this morning, wisdom in his brilliant answer to my question, God gets the glory. If for some reason, you demonstrate a love, a care, and a compassion for others that causes them to give God thanks because you're there to help in a time of need, all glory goes to God.

So let's look a little more at a part of what we hear in these texts especially this morning. Listen again to Romans 3:22. It says the "righteousness [from God] comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." The righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. As we continue in the passage, it continues to unpack that very same idea. It doesn't move on to the next idea. It just says a little bit more to make it clear. It says "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." By the way, Romans 3:23 has been one of those verses that has been in my memory since I was a very young Christian. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It's a reminder just rooted in my psyche that we all fall short, that everyone is guilty, that, in truth, we all deserve condemnations because the wages of sin is death and we've all fallen short, so there's the deal.

But it doesn't end there. It doesn't end where I stopped memorizing. The verse continues for us this morning "and all are justified freely by his grace [as a gift] through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The point that Paul is making is not that all have sinned but they were

all in the same boat. The primary emphasis in that boat is not so much our sin as God's way of redeeming us. Because we're all in the same boat, he saves us all the same way. We are *all* justified by faith in Christ Jesus. It is God's love, God's grace extended to us and the entire world. The point that Paul is making in this section of the beginning part of this book of Romans which goes into all sorts of theology is this. Stop dividing yourself as Jews and Gentiles, as the chosen and the unclean, and recognize that God's love is for all people. Maybe, today, it would be good to say Lutherans, Catholics, and Muslims alike. God's love is universal. He doesn't love you because you're special. You're special because he loves you. The love that he gives to you to forgive you of your sin and your sins is the same love he gives to all people through Jesus. So we proclaim that word of hope as a reformation gospel to allow the Holy Spirit to draw all people to faith in Christ which will declare them forgiven and righteous.

The word justification which is in that phrase that we used so often as Lutherans - we're justified by grace through faith - is the same word that also is translated as "righteous." It's important that we understand that we are not only declared forgiven, we are also declared righteous. If you're anything like me, that's where the real struggle is. How many of you have experienced in your life through family, through friends, that people have been willing to forgive you? So when we hear the forgiveness of God, it's not like we never experienced forgiveness before, and often we are able actually to grasp that. I believe today that I am forgiven through Christ.

Can I see hands? Do you believe today you're forgiven? That is a word of God's love and we could almost stop right here, right? Let's just go home. I mean what a brilliant thing that so many of you understand that you have forgiveness in Christ. Now I hope that's not just a hand going up. I hope that's how you feel in your heart.

What I want to say to you is that the declaration goes well beyond that. The term "justify" describes what happens when people believe in Christ as their savior. From the negative viewpoint, God declares them to be not guilty, that is, forgiven. From the positive viewpoint, God declares them to be righteous. How many of you are righteous? Oh yeah, for a number of you, it was like "Wait a minute. He just told us. Well, I can't argue with what he said. I'm going to have to raise my hand" but when I asked if you were forgiven, boom (up goes the hand). You were

ready to embrace your forgiveness. Now what I want to declare to you is God says of you you are holy. You are righteous. Our dean is going to be with us next week. He's going to preach for All Saints and he's going to say to you you are all saints which means you are holy.

You are righteous and why is that? Because Jesus is and what Jesus deserves is - reformation word – imputed to you. You receive the righteousness of God. It is given. It is declared over you because of what Christ has done for you.

Some of us want to, sort of, look away when we glance in the mirror because we know our own history. We know our own minds. We look in the mirror and we go “I know I'm not innocent. I know I have sin in my life. I know what I've done. And in spite of the fact that I raised my hand a few moments ago and said I was forgiven, I don't always feel forgiven because some of the guilt lingers from those things I've done or not done.” Now if we were in a court of law, if this were a legal crime that you committed and the judge said charges dismissed, or if you were convicted and the governor said you are pardoned, or the president said you are pardoned, you no longer need to bear the burden of that past because of the declaration of the one who has authority to say who is guilty and who is not. And that one loves you and says I give you the merit of my one and only son. You are forgiveness. You are righteous.

Since we're recognizing the journey of these last 18 months, since we're recognizing the difficulty of not being able to gather as God's people or to gather in the church, and we sort of even had a bit of a debate of “can you really do church online? does that really count?” - maybe you get half credit, so you have to listen to it twice. I want us to remember that righteousness is not just God's holiness declared on you, but rather a declaration that God says you're right with him. God says none of that past and none of this present stands as a barrier between us. It's an expression of his love. It's an expression that we cannot be too far from him. He will not allow the sin to separate us from him. He will come to the depths of our struggle so that we might know we are right with God. You are right with God through your faith in Jesus Christ who gave his life for you. That is a declaration. That is an identity that is yours by grace through faith and that is the declaration of the Reformation, this day. So when you hear “go in peace, serve the Lord” recognize that you're going in the peace that comes because God has said you're forgiven and you're righteous. Amen.