



Liturgical Day: Reformation Day
Date: October 26, 2008
Sermon Title: Enthusiasm

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is Reformation Sunday – a festival we celebrate each year on the last Sunday in October. A time to remember that in 1517, on the eve of All Saint's Day (or, as they referred to it then: *All Hallowed's Eve*), Dr. Martin Luther – an unknown Augustinian monk and Old Testament professor – made his way to the community bulletin board in Wittenberg, Germany (which was the front door of the castle church). There he posted a list of ninety-five complaints he had about the church of his day. This simple act set off a chain of events that would have him excommunicated within three-and-a-half years. But within a decade, a movement that eventually bore his name would spread throughout Europe, and then across the whole face of the earth. This movement, which began with one man and his list of complaints on October 31, 1517, would grow in ways that he could never have imagined. Today some eight million people in our own country call themselves Lutherans, and there are more than 60 million Lutherans world-wide.



Reformation Day provides an annual opportunity for us to ask what that means to us. What does it mean to be a Lutheran in today's world? What unique insights about God or the life of faith do Lutherans have? Why is it important, nearly 500 years later, to still have a movement that names itself after Martin Luther? It may well be that the best way to get at some of these questions is to take time to remember the man himself: Dr. Martin Luther.

Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany in 1483. (Interestingly enough, he died in 1546, while visiting in that same town.) Luther grew up a Christian. He was, as were many people in his day, deeply committed to the Roman Catholic Church. He had been studying law when a powerful spiritual experience took hold of his heart. He left his law studies, became a monk, and eventually studied for the priesthood. By 1517, he was a priest and a Doctor of Theology, teaching Old Testament at Wittenberg University.

Martin Luther was a deeply passionate man – and he put considerable energy into practicing his faith. In his early years, that passion seemed to be fueled by fear. He grew up with the impression that God was a stern and angry judge. Luther lived in fear that his life wouldn't measure up to God's great expectations of him, and so he was almost desperate in his desire to pray as much as he could, read the Bible as much as he could, worship as often as he could, and do whatever he could – in order to demonstrate his faithfulness to God. Sadly, this spirit of fear led him to doubt that his efforts were sufficient, and during the first part of his life he found himself wondering whether or not he would be included in God's eternal kingdom.

If the passion of his first years was fueled by fear, then you might say that the enthusiasm of his later years was fueled by freedom. After becoming a monk, and while studying to become first a priest and eventually a professor, Luther spent a great deal of time reading the Gospels and the writings of the Apostle Paul. The story is told of late one night when Luther was in his study –

FIRST LESSON
JEREMIAH 31:31-34
PSALM
PSALM 46
second lesson
ROMANS 3:19-28
gospel lesson
St. JOHN 8:31-36
prayer of the day
ALMIGHTY GOD, GRACIOUS LORD, WE THANK YOU THAT YOUR HOLY SPIRIT RENEWS THE CHURCH IN EVERY AGE. POUR OUT YOUR HOLY SPIRIT ON YOUR FAITHFUL PEOPLE. KEEP THEM STEADFAST IN YOUR WORD, PROTECT AND COMFORT THEM IN TIMES OF TRIAL, DEFEND THEM AGAINST ALL ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL, AND BESTOW ON THE CHURCH YOUR SAVING PEACE, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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supposedly in a tower on the campus at Wittenberg – when God revealed something to him that he had never before realized. Through the powerful testimony of the Apostle Paul, it was revealed to Luther that nobody would be justified in God’s sight by what they do. The only way to become right with God is through faith in what Jesus had accomplished on our behalf. It is God’s gifts of grace and forgiveness that determine who is right with God and who isn’t.

That may sound perfectly reasonable to us, having heard this message for most of our lives. But it was a radical insight for Luther and the people of his time. In those days, the church taught that believers had to work hard at their faith in order to earn God’s love. Luther’s study of the Bible helped him to see that this kind of thinking was diametrically opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If it was up to us, none of us could ever live a life that was good enough to be worthy of God’s love. We could never make ourselves right by what we do. No matter how hard we try, we can’t escape our sinful human nature.

But what we can’t do, God can do – and has done. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power of death, has proclaimed the gracious gift of forgiveness, and has promised the gift of life to any who would believe. In other words, God has set us free from the need to make ourselves worthy of salvation. We are freed from needing to earn God’s love. We are freed from a lifetime of fearing for our salvation; freed from the rules and customs and laws that were an overbearing weight for the people of Luther’s day. We are free, because God has set us free from all that binds us – and God has set us free for a life of faithfulness.

That is the freedom Luther rediscovered during his study as a young professor. That is the freedom that made Luther so enthusiastic about his faith. And Luther’s enthusiasm is a hint as to what faithfulness was all about for him. In his early years, his faith may have been a painful burden to bear. But once he discovered the grace of Christ – or perhaps more accurately, once the grace of Christ discovered him – he began to live out his faithfulness with an overwhelming joy. He prayed and worshipped and served and mediated, not out of a sense of guilt or obligation. But he entered fully into these faith disciplines, enthusiastic about what God had done for him, and eager to discover more and more about what it means to live in God’s grace.

For Luther, there was no greater joy than being a faithful Christian. And he looked forward to every chance he had to read and study the Bible, to spend time with God in prayer, to worship with God’s people, and to reach out in service to those who had needs.

Today is Reformation Sunday, and an appropriate day to consider the faith and ministry of Martin Luther and the other 16th Century reformers. But here at Saint Peter this is also the fourth week of this year’s Fall Stewardship Drive, and a good time to think about what we can learn from Luther’s faith, as we consider our own support of this congregation.

I know that there are some of us who give like Luther believed in the first part of his life. Some of us give out of a sense of duty or obligation. And some times, we aren’t especially excited about our giving. As a matter of fact, there may even be times when we resent it. But that’s not what God wants. As Paul wrote, God loves a cheerful giver. God wants us to be enthusiastic about what we invest in Christian ministry. God wants us to enjoy it. God wants us to look forward to it.

That wasn’t the way it was where I grew up – and that wasn’t the way it was at first for me. I used to be a very reluctant giver. I never gave any more than I thought I absolutely had to, and I always half regretted the fact that I gave it. But then I met some people who were excited about their giving. I met some people who weren’t giving because they thought they had to – but who were giving because God had been so good to them, and they were thrilled with the chance to help. They were the kind of people who looked forward to the chance to give. They were the kind of people who found great joy and meaning in being generous. They were the kind of people who had a contagious enthusiasm about their generosity. And as they talked to me about their joy, I began to see that I, too, could enjoy giving. They encouraged me to focus, not on how much I didn’t have because of my giving – but on how much God could accomplish through my giving. And do you know what? It began to happen. The more I gave, the more I enjoyed it. And the more I enjoyed it, the more I gave. And now I too look forward to those chances I get to invest in Christian ministry.

That kind of enthusiastic generosity is contagious. And this year, we want you to catch the bug. We want you to learn what it is like to give freely, and boldly, and joyfully, and enthusiastically. We want you to experience what it is like to give in the same way that Luther came to believe: joyfully, gratefully, lovingly, boldly and enthusiastically. Because when you do, then the gift has as much of a positive impact on the giver as it does on the recipient.

May that be the case with our giving in this coming year. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 26, 2008)

Stewardship Gospel Lesson (English Text): ⁱ

^{13:44} "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.." ⁱⁱ

Stewardship Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

^{13.44} Ομοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν θησαυρῷ κεκρυμμένῳ ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ, ὃν εὐρὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔκρυψεν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς χαρᾶς αὐτοῦ ὑπάγει καὶ πωλεῖ πάντα ὅσα ἔχει καὶ ἀγοράζει τὸν ἀγρὸν ἐκεῖνον. ⁴⁵ Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ ἐμπόρῳ ζητοῦντι καλοὺς μαργαρίτας· ⁴⁶ εὐρὼν δὲ ἓνα πολύτιμον μαργαρίτην ἀπελθὼν πέπρακεν πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν καὶ ἠγόρασεν αὐτόν.

⁴⁷ Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν σαγήνη βληθείση εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ ἐκ παντὸς γένους συναγαγούση· ⁴⁸ ἣν ὅτε ἐπληρώθη ἀναβιβάσαντες ἐπὶ τὸν αἰγιαλὸν καὶ καθίσαντες συνέλεξαν τὰ καλὰ εἰς ἄγγη, τὰ δὲ σαπρὰ ἔξω ἔβαλον. ⁴⁹ οὕτως ἔσται ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος· ἔξελεύσονται οἱ ἄγγελοι καὶ ἀφοριούσιν τοὺς πονηροὺς ἐκ μέσου τῶν δικαίων ⁵⁰ καὶ βαλοῦσιν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν κάμινον τοῦ πυρός· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων. ⁱⁱⁱ

Reformation Gospel Lesson (English Text): ^{iv}

^{8.31} Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." ^v

Reformation Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

^{8.31} ἔλεγεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίουσιν ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ, ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἐστε ³² καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ St. Matthew 13:44-50, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Matthew 13:44-50, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

^{iv} A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^v St. John 8:31-36, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς. ³³ ἀπεκρίθησαν πρὸς αὐτόν σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἔσμεν καὶ οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε πῶς σὺ λέγεις ὅτι ἐλεύθεροι γενήσεσθε; ³⁴ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δούλος ἐστὶν τῆς ἁμαρτίας. ³⁵ ὁ δὲ δούλος οὐ μένει ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ὁ υἱὸς μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ³⁶ ἔὰν οὖν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ, ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε. ^{vi}

Reformation First Lesson (English Text):

^{31.31} The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. ^{vii}

^{vi} St. John 8:31-36, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

^{vii} Jeremiah 31:31-34, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).