

The Rev. Joel Petruschke  
Our Saviour/St. Stephens  
Reformation Sunday  
October 29, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, welcome to Reformation Sunday.

Reformation Sunday, as we may know, always falls on the last Sunday in the month of October.

And this day is a day of great significance, for Lutherans anyway, because we remember at this time of year that on October 31<sup>st</sup>, in the year 1517, Martin Luther sparked a revolution.

We are not speaking of Martin Luther King, Jr. who was a civil rights activist in the 1960s, who sparked his own revolution.

No, we are talking about Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century church reformer, who sparked a revolution called the Reformation.

Martin Luther opposed the medieval Roman church, by posting his *95 Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther was a Catholic priest and a professor of theology, teaching at the University of Wittenberg, at the time.

He couldn't possibly have known how his action would change the world.

He had posted the *95 Theses* as points for discussion.

He posted them for the purpose of spawning an academic debate among scholars and church officials.

The ordinary person would not even have been able to read the *Theses* as they were written in Latin.

How wide of a debate he envisioned is hard to say. He did send a copy of the *95 Theses* to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz.

But what happened is that thanks to the recent invention of the Gutenberg Press, the *95 Theses* were reproduced and disseminated widely.

And because Luther's words were seen as opposing the medieval Roman Church's position, particularly with respect to the sale of indulgences, Luther was seen as a problem.

Now, indulgences, if we weren't aware, were just pieces of paper signed by church officials that provided the forgiveness of sin.

Individuals could buy these papers and be guaranteed forgiveness, but one needed to buy more and more of the papers as one's sins accumulated.

And the sale of these indulgences then provided immense funds for the church, which were used for the support of the lavish lifestyles of church officials as well as the building of grandiose church buildings.

Meanwhile, the majority of persons living under the authority of the pope struggled to get by every day.

This is what Luther was responding to, when he wrote the *95 Theses*—this hypocrisy in the church.

This is what led to the Reformation, when the Christian masses realized they were being fleeced of their money.

Luther taught that one didn't have to buy the forgiveness of one's sins, because Jesus had already purchased our forgiveness by his most precious blood on the cross.

Luther then was upsetting the money-making scheme of the church and the battle lines were drawn that resulted in the eventual division of the church.

This is what we as Lutherans then remember each year at the end of October.

Why post the *95 Theses* on October 31<sup>st</sup>? Because it was All Hallows' Eve, from where we get the word Halloween.

All Hallows' Eve is the day before All Saints' Day, another name for All Hallows' Day, "hallow" meaning holy person or saint.

Luther posted the *Theses* on this day, because he knew the next day, the *Theses* would be seen by those who came to church.

PAUSE

Now then, what I would like to do today in this sermon is talk a little bit about Lutheran pride.

For it seems to me that Reformation Sunday lends itself to this topic, Lutheran pride, more so than any other day of the year.

So, I want to speak about Lutheran pride.

In the hope of building up our Lutheran spirit, almost like the cheering section at a sporting event.

We have spirit. Yes we do. We have spirit how 'bout you.

PAUSE

And, I preface talk about Lutheran pride by saying that I have been a Lutheran all my life.

I was baptized a Lutheran as an infant.

I was raised in a Lutheran congregation.

I attended Sunday School and Lutheran worship growing up.

I was confirmed a Lutheran.

I married a woman who also was baptized and confirmed Lutheran.

Kathy and I were married in her home church in Kittanning, PA, which is Lutheran.

Her home church is of course Lutheran.

And both my wife and I were ordained in the Lutheran church.

And by God's grace, we will have our funerals in a Lutheran church.

So, I am steeped in Lutheranism, and I love being a Lutheran.

Not that I think Lutherans have it all figured out, nor do I think that Lutherans are above criticism.

If you have ever been to the holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., one is reminded that Lutherans aren't perfect.

For there in the Holocaust museum, there is particular film that is part of the exhibit.

And in this film it speaks about Hitler's propaganda machine, in which Hitler used Luther's antisemitic writings to sow animosity against the Jews of Hitler's day.

Now some scholars will argue that these writings of Luther were composed in Luther's later years when he had grown frustrated and cynical because the Jewish people were not converting to his new brand of Christianity, as he thought they would.

Nevertheless, Luther's writings are clear enough, and you can't get around Luther's antisemitism.

Nor is Luther innocent when it comes to what was called the Peasants' War in 1524-1525, in which peasants revolted against the church.

Luther renounced the peasants' violent revolt and empowered the aristocracy in the areas of uprising to put down the peasants.

Luther wrote, "Let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly...nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel."

And the Peasants' War resulted in the slaughter of some 100,000 of the 300,000 poorly armed peasants and farmers.

It is not a shining moment in Lutheran history.

So, yes, Luther and Lutheranism has had to own its share of tragic errors and missteps.

And so, no, I don't think Lutherans have it all figured out. Nor do I think our theology is without its problems.

But, still, personally, I love being a Lutheran.

I am proud to be a Lutheran because we can boast of Lutheran composers like Johann Sebastian Bach, and Johann Pachelbel.

We can boast that astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler, who developed Kepler law's of planetary motion, which describe the orbits of planets—Kepler was a Lutheran.

We can boast that cartoonist Gary Larson of the *Far Side* cartoon is a Lutheran.

And Robert Cade, the inventor of Gatorade, was a Lutheran.

And Theodor Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, was a Lutheran.

The great existential philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was also a Lutheran.

And Albert Schweitzer, who was a doctor, a missionary, a renowned organist, a theologian, as well as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient was a Lutheran.

And Eero Saarinen, the architect who designed the St. Louis arch, was a Lutheran.

Indeed, many, many famous persons throughout the span of history have practiced the Lutheran faith.

PAUSE

In addition to famous Lutherans, Lutheranism is famous for other reasons.

The modern German language as we have it, has Martin Luther to thank.

When Luther translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German, so that the ordinary person could read God's Word...

When Luther translated the Bible, it was subsequently printed on the Gutenberg Press, and distributed throughout Germany, such that Luther's translation of the Bible resulted in the standardization of the German language across Germany.

Before that event, Germany consisted of numerous German dialects.

Luther is also had a big hand in creating our modern day game of bowling.

Apparently around 400 A.D. bowling began in Germany.

It existed in various forms before this.

But in Germany it became a sort of religious ritual whereby one cleanse one's self of sin by rolling a rock to knock down heathen represented by a pin.

Over time, the game spread in Germany with various numbers of pins (3 to 17).

Luther enjoyed the game, and established the number of pins at nine, standardizing other rules as well.

He liked the game so much, he even had a bowling lane built next to his home for his children.

Later when bowling came to this country, Nine Pins as it was known was outlawed because it seen as a scandalous game associated with gambling.

But to get around the laws against Nine Pins, another pin was added. There were no laws, you see, against bowling with ten pins.

Luther is also credited with the tradition of putting lights on Christmas trees.

Legend has it, he was working on a sermon one night while walking through the woods, and he looked up and saw the stars shining through the branches of the trees.

So inspired was he that he went home and put candles on a tree, which eventually evolved over time into electric lights on our Christmas trees.

So when you get out your string of Christmas lights this year and you're buggered because the string is all in knots, you can say to yourself, "Thank you, Martin Luther."

There is so much more we could talk about with respect to Luther's and Lutheranism's impact on our world.

And, again, please don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say that Lutheranism is better than any other Christian denomination out there.

No, but I do think we can be proud of our Lutheran heritage and of who we are as Lutherans.

Martin Luther certainly impacted worship life as well. He loved singing and music, and was instrumental in bringing hymn singing into worship life.

He even composed many hymns himself including *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, which some say he borrowed melody from a bar tune.

Makes sense right, people coming to church would know the tunes from the drinking establishments, only Luther added religious text to the songs.

And Luther made the preached Word central to the worship experience as well.

But, no doubt, NO DOUBT, Luther's greatest gift to the Christian church has been his emphasis on "grace."

Grace is "short term" for how we are saved, of course.

We are not saved by anything we do.

We are not saved by buying indulgences. Nor are we saved by doing service for our neighbor. Nor are we saved by following the Ten Commandments. Nor are we saved by coming to church.

No, we are saved by grace. We are saved by a gift, by God's Son who died on the cross for us.

And we serve our neighbor then, and we follow the Ten Commandments, and we come to church NOT because we have to, but because we get to, because these things, too, are a gift.

Yes, grace is NO DOUBT the single most important contribution from Martin Luther.

But he didn't invent grace, he re-discovered it, and in fact re-re-discovered it.

Grace was what the Ten Commandments were for the people of Israel long ago, before they became obligations for God's holy people.

The Ten Commandments were about grace, they were a gift to help God's people live with one another.

And before Christianity became, at the time of the medieval Roman church, a lot of rules and regulations about how to earn salvation...

Before the misguided medieval Roman church, Christianity was about grace.

Christianity had been about the gift of new life in Christ, as the apostle Paul had originally interpreted it.

As the text from Romans says, "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; we are now made right in God's eyes by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Yes, Luther didn't invent grace, but re-re-discovered it, and of that we can be very, very proud.

For that is the message we cannot forget on this year's Reformation Sunday nor can we forget on any other Reformation Sunday moving forward.

God gives. God is graceful. For this ultimately is what makes us free—grace, not JUST in terms of our salvation, but with respect to all things in life.

To be graceful AND NOT condemning of others, whatever the circumstance we find ourselves—to be graceful is to lift up freedom for the other and for ourselves.

Grace. Grace. Grace. This is the Lutheran heritage of which we can be most proud.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.