

Reformation Sunday, 10.25.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

“The Work of Christian Love”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen. Good morning. Thank you for joining us in person and online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.*

*Guten Morgen, mein Name ist Martin Luther. Ich habe viele guter Dinge ueber eure Treue zum Evangelium bei St. Mark's gehoert. Heute, am Reformationssonntag erinnern wir uns daran, dass wir durch die Gnade und den Glauben Gerechte werden. So moechte ich zu euch heute ueber einige meiner Erfahrungen waehrend der Reformation sprechen. Jetzt werde ich weiter in Englisch zu euch reden.*

(English translation: Good morning, my name is Martin Luther. I have heard many good things about your faithfulness to the gospel at St. Mark’s. Today on Reformation Sunday we remember that we are made righteous by grace through faith. So I would like to talk to you today about some of my experiences during the Reformation. I will speak now speak to you in English).

I never imagined that 503 years after I wrote the *95 Theses*, that people would be celebrating something called “The Reformation.” It was my great hope that the church of the 16th century could reform itself through a great church council, but Pope Leo X made this impossible. Before the Reformation many others had tried to reform the church. In 1379 Catherine of Siena wrote to Pope Urban VI encouraging him to be the shepherd of the church. Jan Hus had also worked toward reforms, but the church was resistant to hearing the good news of the gospel, and Hus was condemned at the Council of Constance in 1415. I was very aware that Hus had been burned at the stake just 102 years before I wrote the *95 Theses*. So your celebration today is a reminder of the continued power of the freedom that the grace of God gives to all who believe.

What is the good news of the gospel? It is written in Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “*For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*” The good news is that God’s grace is a gift, and the one who receives God’s grace through faith is forgiven and made righteous. As I wrote in 1518 in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, when we believe in God’s grace, our justification is complete, and nothing else needs to be done.

I tried to make this clear in my early writings - we cannot buy salvation through indulgences; rather, the grace of Christ sets us free to live for others. As I wrote in the *95 Theses*, the gospel exhorts us “*to be diligent in following Christ... and thus confident of entering heaven.*” The

suffering of Christ is God's grace hidden in the cross for everyone who believes. So as Jesus says in the gospel for today, "*If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*"

The cross and resurrection free us from sin, death and the devil so that we might live as servants of all people. This is the "freedom of a Christian." Christian freedom is not the same as political or legal freedom, for Christians are freed from sin, death and the devil, even when they are politically persecuted or lacking in legal freedoms. The freedom of Christ Jesus is the only true freedom that human beings can fully experience, because it drives out all fear of the powers of this world.

In *The Freedom of a Christian* I wrote, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Christian freedom is about serving others who still need to hear God's reassurance of grace and freedom. But you know all this already! Early this morning, I was in your church library and was very impressed by your collection of Evangelical literature about faith and freedom in Christ. I came to speak to you today about one of my experiences in the Reformation that you may not have heard about. If you would like, you can read about it in my collected writings, volume 45 in English (also in your church library)!

I understand that St. Mark's is currently doing, what I believe you call the "Annual Stewardship Appeal." I commend you for this because this is something that I encouraged churches to do in the Reformation. A little background may be helpful for you.

During the Reformation, people heard the good news of justification by grace through faith, and experienced true freedom for the first time. Monks and nuns left their monasteries and convents and lived as servants of Christ in the world. Indeed, my wife Katrina von Bora had been a Benedictine nun. What you may not understand is that as the monasteries and bishops lost power and authority, churches needed to find ways to direct and support their own work in their local community.

So as more and more churches became Reformation churches, they needed help in organizing themselves and funding their work. In 1522, I was approached by a church in Saxony in the town of Leisnig, about 50 kilometers southeast of Leipzig. They needed help, 1) in calling a pastor and preacher, and 2) in setting up a "Common Fund" for a "Common Chest." I visited Leisnig on September 25, 1522 – 498 years ago. After visiting them, I returned to Wittenberg and wrote something titled the *Ordinance of a Common Chest* (1523). Two years earlier in 1521 I had made a similar appeal in an *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* recommending that every city should take care of its own poor, by organizing a system of assistance for the poor to replace the woefully inadequate measures of Medieval Germany. I believe today, you call this "Social Welfare." So the Reformation was the beginning something you take for granted today.

So I realized in general terms, people had heard the good news and experienced freedom in Christ, but still needed help in organizing a church to do evangelical work in their community. So in my *Ordinance of a Common Chest*, I recommended that churches establish a “Common Fund,” I believe you call this your “General Fund.” I also recommended setting up a committee of “Ten Directors of the Common Fund.” I believe you call this your “Congregation Council.” The Directors of the Common Fund were to be diligent in collecting tithes, offerings, and gifts for the Common Fund so that the work of the local church could be carried out. I understand from Pastor McKenzie that you are diligently making this appeal right now for your General Fund for next year. I commend you for your faithful response to the gospel!

498 years ago, when I visited Leisnig, I also recommended that the “Common Fund” be kept in a “Common Chest.” A Common Chest is a large strongbox with four different locks and keys, held by four different Directors of the congregation. Unfortunately, we did not yet have the ATM machines and wire transfer methods that you enjoy today. We had to keep the Common Fund in the church under lock and key, ready to disburse and make payments from.

I recommended to the church at Leisnig that the Common Fund be used in the following ways: for the pastoral ministry of the congregation, for Christian education, for worship life and needed supplies, and for general building upkeep and repairs.

You also may not realize it, but in my day, public begging was a very significant problem. So I recommended that public begging should be outlawed in Reformation church parishes and towns, and that the poor should be cared for from the common funds in the Common Chest. I recommended that the needy, orphans, widows, the sick, those in need in the congregation, as well as the stranger, be cared for from these common funds.

Finally, I recommended that the local church have three annual meetings a year (I believe you have two), and that the Ten Directors make a full report to the congregation annually. It is my understanding that your church still, more or less, follows this basic structure for ordering your parish life. I am simply amazed by your faith and your response to the good news of the gospel! 498 years after I made my recommendations to Evangelical congregations in Germany, you are engaged in Evangelical mission across the ocean here in North America.

In 1522, when I wrote these ordinances, I wrote that out of the common fund gifts “could be made in Christian love to all the needy in the land.” This is why you are engaged in your Annual Stewardship Appeal: The work of Christian love needs the support of all members of the church. The work of Christian love never ends and is always in need of your gifts so that the world will see

God's love through your faith and good works. Good works don't get us into heaven; rather, good works are our response to what God has *already done* for us in Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus sets us free to serve others in love, for Christ's sake.

So your support of the General Fund at St. Mark's is how Christian mission takes place. Like Christians of 498 years ago in Leisnig, your pledges and gifts for St. Mark's mission are your response to God's grace. Your gifts to St. Mark's are vital to this church's continued mission for Christ. The church is always one generation away from disappearing. The church depends upon you, in this moment, right now. Thank you for letting me join your service today! And thank you for your work of Christian love.

*Finally, I would like to add a few words as your pastor.* As Luther told us, the work of a local church depends upon the gifts of its members and friends. This is our Christian faith: that freed by Christ to serve others, we do the work of Christian love for the world. We are the hands of Christ in our community. We need all of your hands, and we need all of your gifts. Please make a pledge to St. Mark's for 2021 so that we can continue to do the work of Christian love in this place.

Luther found inspiration in Psalm 46 to write the hymn "*A Mighty Fortress is Our God.*" So it is fitting that today's anthem for brass choir and organ is "*Concerto on 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God'*" by Vaclav Nelhybel. Psalm 46 reads, "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*" The day after the 2011 Great Tôhoku Earthquake and Tsunami, this psalm was read in the chapel at the Lutheran seminary and college in Tokyo. It was reminder that though the "*earth should change, the mountains shake in the heart of the sea and its waters roar and foam*" - God is our refuge and strength. Today's world is being shaken by a pandemic, yet Psalm 46 reminds us that as "*nations are in an uproar and the kingdoms totter...The Lord of hosts is with us...*"

Though St. Mark's has been challenged in 2020, "God is our refuge and strength." So in the spirit of Martin Luther, I exhort you to be diligent in completing your pledges for this year, 2020, as well as in making a pledge for 2021. Renew in your heart today the only freedom that really matters: freedom in Christ. God is our refuge and strength. In times of challenge, conflict, and even pandemic, Christ continues with us – freeing us to love and to serve others. Amen.