

Reformation Day, 10.31.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Justified by Grace”

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

Good morning. On Reformation Day we give thanks that God justifies us by grace through faith. Grace is the gift and work of God (Eph. 2:8). We are justified by grace and our faith is a response to God’s grace, becoming active in love toward our neighbor (Gal. 5:6).

On Reformation Day we don’t simply commemorate a historical event; we celebrate the ongoing reformation and renewal of the church through the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is the reason why we appoint the sanctuary with red paraments and banners; red is a symbol of the purifying and sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit. Celebrating the Reformation is about anticipating the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the life of the church, and the life of this congregation, St. Mark’s.

Yet one might well ask, “What importance do the events of 504 years ago have for us today?” What could a late medieval German theologian possibly have to say of relevance for 21st century people? The Reformation continues to be relevant because, just like the medieval church and its people, we are always captive to our own sinfulness and our own attempts to justify and save ourselves. 500 years later we remain in need of the grace that forgives and frees us from our own sinful selves. Grace frees us to use our moral and intellectual capacity in service for others. Grace frees us to live for others.

When I was in seminary I remember a professor saying “Now, don’t mess this up: we are justified by grace through faith. It’s not the other way around: we are not justified by faith through grace.” Everything begins with what God has done for us: “*We love because God first loved us*” (1 Jn. 4:19). Our faith is a response to God’s justifying grace.

Luther’s own story of seeking forgiveness and freedom from sin is well known. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther was terrified of God. For the young Luther, God was a fearful judge who could only be appeased by good works and the confession of sin. No matter how hard Luther worked or confessed his sin, he was afraid and uncertain the he was truly forgiven. Luther worried, “What about the sins I have forgotten to confess or those about which I am unaware?”

Luther’s “theological breakthrough” came during his study of Paul’s letters, particularly Paul’s Letter to the Romans. There, Luther read the words, “*The righteous will live by faith*” (Rom. 1:17). Luther realized that all of his efforts to earn forgiveness would never free him. Only the gift of

God's grace through faith in the voice of Jesus would liberate him from sin.

Like Luther, we long to be released from our past mistakes and sins. We long for a fresh start, knowing that God loves and forgives us. Paul makes this clear in today's reading from Romans, "*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" Justified by grace means God forgives our sins as the gift of grace. We respond with faith by believing in the promise of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

This was Luther's breakthrough that restored the gospel of grace to the church. We celebrate the Reformation, not as a denominational starting point, a cultural revolution leading to the Enlightenment, or as the beginning of modernity and the freedoms of the individual. These have all, of course, been named as outcomes of Martin Luther and the Reformation. However, we celebrate the Reformation, because Luther rediscovered the gospel of God's grace so that, freed from the self-centeredness of sin, we might truly live for others.

In today's gospel, Jesus had gone early in the morning to the temple where he sat down and was teaching. John says that as Jesus was teaching, many believed in him. So as Jesus was speaking to his Jewish sisters and brothers, he said, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"

Jesus' words are words of grace. Jesus told those listening to him that his word leads to knowledge of the truth - truth that makes us free. Discipleship to Jesus frees us from our sinful past, allowing us to embrace a present and future of service to others. Grace helps us realize the truth about ourselves - our greatest weakness. Who hasn't, in a moment of insight said things like, "me and my big mouth, me and my temper, me and my anger, me and my judgmental ways?"

Yet the people listening to Jesus misunderstood him. They said, "*We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?*" Obviously, this was not true. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt; they had been exiled in Babylon; and as they listened to Jesus, they were a people living under Roman occupation.

Yet, it becomes obvious that Jesus was speaking of a different kind of slavery, and their answer made it clear. Jesus is talking about enslavement to sin. The sin that can make someone so prideful that they will say something that is untrue. Jesus is saying something incredibly basic about the human condition: we are all marred by sin.

Sin leads to a twisted self-understanding, and a twisted understanding of one's neighbor. In love

with ourselves, we are unable to see ourselves and our neighbor as sacred children of God. Sin, of course, includes the addictions, compulsions, and general harm we do to ourselves and others, but our greatest sin is that we are unable to love ourselves and our neighbors as God intended.

We still live in a world of factions and fighting, a world of disunity and distrust of those who are different. We see the terrible signs of humanity's enslavement to sin all around us. We discriminate against our neighbor because of their skin color, their gender, their identity, their ethnicity, their backgrounds. Jesus' words about being slaves to sin are just as alive today as when he spoke them in 1st century Palestine. This is why Luther's rediscovery of the gospel of grace is still relevant today. We are people marred by sin in a world marred by sin.

Jesus continues to come to us with words of grace: "*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*" On Reformation Day we celebrate that by the grace of God we are free at last. We are set free from sin for a purpose: to love and serve our neighbor. In a small book titled, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Martin Luther described the paradox of Christian freedom in this way:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The first part describes absolute freedom in Christ. No government or power on earth can grant this freedom because it belongs solely to Christ. Under Roman occupation, the first Christians had no guaranteed political freedoms, yet their freedom in Christ changed the world with a new understanding of freedom that all people are equal members of Christ's body. No earthly power can grant or separate us from the grace and freedom of Jesus Christ. The second part describes the purpose of Christian freedom: we are freed to give ourselves completely in the service of our neighbor and the world. Freedom in Christ liberates our hands and voices for others.

Luther explained that freedom in Christ is contrary to the popular idea of freedom in our world, which is often license to do anything we want. The extreme opposite of this is to use freedom as an escape from the needs of the world, thinking that to be a Christian simply means showing up on Sunday. The one understands Christian freedom selfishly to do whatever they want, often without regard for one's neighbor. The other mistakenly uses Christian freedom only for themselves leading a spiritual life wholly unrelated to the needs of the world.

When Jesus says, "*If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed,*" he is describing freedom from sin that leads to discipleship and service for others. Christ sets us free from our sinful preoccupation with ourselves so that we can finally live for others. In works like *The Freedom of a*

*Christian*, Luther continues to help us see the purpose of grace and Christian service. Luther restored the moral compass of the gospel of grace to the church.

It is no accident that another prophet bearing the name “Martin Luther” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – said in his last sermon on March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., “We shall overcome, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Jesus Christ is the arc of the moral universe always bending toward a fallen humanity, always seeking to lift and free us from sin so that we might love and serve others. Only Jesus Christ will help us overcome the sinful pride and hypocrisy that sees others solely by their skin color, gender, identity and ethnicity, so that we can finally see in our neighbor a fellow human being, a child of God.

Psalm 46 was the inspiration for Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and verse five reads, “*God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.*” We are freed by Christ to be hands and voices helping God in the midst of the city each day. Psalm 46 describes God as “*our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*” We are freed by grace to be hands and voices of God’s help in the city – a very present help to those facing trouble and challenge.

Every Sunday we are freed and forgiven by grace, we are fed at the Lord’s table, and we sent out from this place to be a sign that God is present in the city. Our ministries of compassion feed, clothe, and give hope to others. Today we offer our 2022 Pledge Cards in response to God’s liberating grace that frees us to be in ministry as a church. Today we also install our 2022 Congregation Council as a sign that we are freed to be servants of Jesus and of one another.

On Reformation Day we joyfully offer ourselves, our time, and our possessions as signs that we are the voices and hands of Christ in the world. The grace and freedom of Jesus is unchanging; “*Jesus Christ, the living Word of God is the same yesterday, today and forever*” (Heb. 13:8).

*God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.* Live with grace and freedom that Jesus is with you. Serve others as a sign that God is in the midst of the city. Amen.