

Reformation Day

499 years ago on October 31, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. He thought he was engaging in a scholarly debate. Not that long ago he had posted 98 theses on another subject and hardly a word had been spoken. They were equally inflammatory and provocative. But this time something different would transpire. These theses were brought to a printer and quickly disseminated far beyond the academic circle he wrote for. Did he intend that? There is much debate about that. Secondly, this topic went right to the heart of the Renaissance era Papal money making machine. He was taking on indulgences.



Medieval Christianity had gotten itself into a tough theological spot. It all started rather innocently with a guy named Gregory the Great in the waning days of the Roman Empire's influence in Western Europe. He was surrounded by barbarians running amok. He sought to use spiritual rewards as a form of behavior modification. If you are not behaving, you won't get to enjoy your afterlife. In that situation, it probably saved many lives, it helped very coarse and difficult people make a connection between their actions and their relationship with God.



The problem will come when medieval Christianity starts to build on what was a solution for a particular situation as if it were a solid foundation for every generation. It is always bad to build a system on exceptional circumstances. By the Renaissance period there were many in power and ecclesial authority who were quite jaded about all this and simply were using this system as a means to extract money from the descendents of these very barbarians. And yet, even here was God entirely absent? It was the money extracted from the barbarians of Germany and elsewhere which funded the artists of the Renaissance – Leo X's brother, Clement VII would on his death bed commission Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with those funds.

One hundred years before Luther Jan Hus had tried to take on this machinery and gotten burned at the stake for his efforts. (I tell my Lutheran Confessions classes that if they come to a minor character on an exam and they have no idea who he is, it is usually best to simply say "he got burned at the stake." They have a slightly better than 50/50 chance of being right.) This time it will be different. In Luther's day Turks will invade drawing away the attention of the political powers. They don't have time to deal with Luther. The printing press will disseminate his ideas much more widely and deeper into the newly literate and interested general population. Luther himself will be a much brighter and abler speaker, theologian, strategist than Hus. But all that does not explain what happened here in entirety.

This day, if it will really be a feast day, celebrates the fact that this was an event of the Holy Spirit. If you are not able to say that, then one really has to question why you are celebrating it at all. The church of the late middle ages was profoundly sick, from the top to the bottom. God

raised a large movement of reform to deal with that sickness and Luther was a spear point in all that, a spear hurled at the corrupt heart of a broken Church. God split it, killed it in a sense, so that he could raise up something good in its place. He has always been bringing the lofty low so that the humble could be raised up. It is just His way.

In the years that followed Luther's 95 theses, he would write voluminously. A concerted effort at avoiding schism would be made. You know the chief document of that attempt as the Augsburg Confession. It failed. The irenic approach of Melancthon to the Papal and Imperial powers would be met with a cold shoulder. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession is much more pugnacious. Within 17 years of its publication Luther would write the Smalkald Articles which express his anger and frustration at the whole effort to talk with Rome.

But what did not fail, in fact what succeeded remarkably, was the Catechisms, especially the Small Catechism. It would profoundly shape the people of Germany and Scandinavia, the Baltic region and beyond. Diarmaid MacCulloch wrote a marvelous history of the time simply entitled "The Reformation" and he notes that the people clamoring for the Reformation change as the Catechism does its work. Initially the people who were standing up for Luther were the political types, the nobles and theologians. But a few decades later, when the Catholics tried to force some cities back into the Catholic fold, it was the burgers, petty nobility, and middle classes who resisted. Even later, during and after the 30 Years War, it was peasants who grabbed their pitchforks and pruning hooks and stood in the way of the Imperial soldiers. They would rather die than go back to the old ways of papal authority manipulating them spiritually. They defended their catechism and demanded their preachers instruct them in it.

If anything, this celebration is really a celebration of the good work the Holy Spirit has done and continues to do through the Catechism. Perhaps a reading of the explanation of the creed would be in order, or perhaps a sermon on the genius of Luther's explanation of the commandments which are kept as we fear and love God.



We could preach a sermon on this fellow. The picture just above this paragraph is of John Frederic the Magnanimous. He was the first Lutheran prince who was schooled in the catechism and would make a great sermon outline. Gracious in defeat, he would accomplish far more from a prison cell as he recovered from his terrible facial wound than he ever did as a warrior prince (theology of the cross). He really gave hope to the first generation of Lutherans who cut their teeth on the catechism and demonstrate to them what it meant to be a Christian in that context. This sort of a sermon is not so much about what we say no to in Catholicism, but much more about what we say "yes" to in our catechisms.

The preacher today may simply ask, "Why do we celebrate this day?" Do we come to it in a way which is triumphalistic – celebrating the victory? Do we come to it as a penitent? Do we come to it with thanksgiving? But thankful for what? The eighteenth century literary figure, Dr. Samuel Johnson once said that the events of the sixteenth century were a "deformation." Was he right? Is it a cautionary tale, a story we tell again and again so we don't go back there? But who today is suggesting that we would go back to this?

What is the difference today? Luther called for worship in the language of the people, he called for communion in both kinds, he called for a reform of the corrupt practices of the day, and most of them have been addressed. Catholicism still does not have married priests. But is that reason enough to keep us apart? Why do we even exist anymore – hasn't the Lutheran reformation accomplished what it set out to do?

Some years ago one of us thought that the Reformation should be celebrated because it was a moment in history which is still being felt. In that moment God told us that he loves us and that he is alive and active in our lives and that this is all by his free gift to us. For someone who has grown up in the RC dominated world of Latin America, the Reformation continues to have a resonance which we have often lost in the post-denominational North American scene. The things for which Luther fought are more tenuous than we imagine, and they are far more precious than we realize. Has Bonhoeffer pegged us accurately with his accusation that we believe in “cheap grace?” Should all Lutheran pastors be required to take a trip south of the border to see why the Reformation was and remains important? The Reformation tells us that we are not sufficient and that is OK because God is sufficient.

The Reformation is not really about being a Lutheran, but it is the celebration of the proclamation of Grace. I know Roman Catholics who celebrate Luther and the Reformation. I know folks in almost every denomination who celebrate the good thing that God did in the 16th century through the reformers. We celebrate the Reformation because of Grace! We often forget just how important that is and what it is like not to have that gift given.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The order of the requests here is important. Saving peace, which we seem to long for in the LCMS, will elude us without the first five elements. We cannot do an end run around these things and obtain peace on our own terms. It must come from God, in his way. We have a hard time trusting that God can do this. Our American “do-it-myself” attitude is a problem here.

This is the bold claim that Lutherans make for this day and really for their whole movement. This is/was an act of the Holy Spirit. The rejection by those in control in the time of Luther was really an assertion that this was not of the Holy Spirit, but of another divisive spirit that must be attributed to the evil one. It is one or the other.

Recent years have seen a remarkable change in the attitudes toward Luther among thoughtful Roman Catholics. For all its faults, one must acknowledge that the Justification document signed a few years ago by the Lutherans of the Lutheran World Federation



(about 90% of the worldwide Lutheran communion) and the Roman Catholics was significant. Yes, the document was flawed, but it certainly was a step in the right direction. You can find it online if you are interested in reading it. The LCMS did not sign on off on this thing, but one has to wonder if that was a decision based on theology or internal politics of the Synod. Surely as people faithful to the confessions we should rejoice when the vast majority of Christians make a step in the right direction.

Even more startling was my own experience at Notre Dame University in 2006 and 2007. While studying Aquinas we came to the topic of faith and my Dominican Professor (remember that John Tetzel was a Dominican) said that Luther got it far more right than Thomas Aquinas when it came to explaining faith. That is a huge statement to make, one that even a generation or two ago would have been unthinkable for a Dominican professor at a Roman Catholic institution. Praise God for that!

But is it time for us to think about some of the things that we have said as well? To confess that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the Reformation movement is a good thing, but it is not to say that it is without its own errors. Have we also overstated the case against Catholicism? Have we sometimes in an effort to prove our love of God shown we were not “Catholic” by ignoring his mother? Have we understood ourselves to be “not Catholic” and let that be all that we are? Are we simply “not Catholic?” What is a Lutheran when stated positively? For five hundred years almost we have been understood to be in a tension with Catholicism. If that tension were to dissolve, what would become of us? Do our rejections of Catholicism still ring true? They have adopted most of the things that Luther fought so hard for. The abuses of simony have been dealt with. Communion is distributed in both kinds, the worship of God’s people happens in the language of the people. A significant statement has been made regarding justification. If you read the Augsburg Confession, one gets the sense that Melanchthon and his peers might have taken JDDJ. The Papal power of infallibility has been exercised one, yes count them all, one time. (Granted this was something to do with Marian piety.)

What still stands between us? Recently I attended the LCM S Theological Educators conference, held this time in Irvine at our sister school there. It was a good conference, but it also had a critical flaw. We were exploring articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg confession in which we confess that it is enough for the unity of the Church that we agree concerning the Gospel. We never once brought up the fact that when Melanchthon wrote that he was arguing that the Lutheran’s were still part of the Roman Catholic Church. We were not arguing for our separation but for our inclusion! We could only see that as a means to divide us. I found it sad.

Even the whole issue of the prayers to saints is acknowledged to be a serious problem by Catholic theologians. The lay people continue to pray to saints and Roman Catholic theologians roll their eyes and beg them to pray “with” the saints, something that Luther himself was willing to accord. Even some of the Marian stuff is not that far off; although, this preacher finds disturbing things in there.

Perhaps there is much that still divides us, perhaps there is not. But this day we pray for the Spirit's guidance upon the Church to deliver us through times of temptation, and to save us from enemies so that the Church will have God's peace.

Is the temptation to think that we are the only church sometimes? Walther himself denied that strenuously. (Of course he would sometimes also rail against the Godless papists. He must have been thinking of Anglicans, but in the current climate isn't that a scary thought?) Who are the enemies? If not the Catholics, then whom do we fight against? You will find corners of the Missouri Synod, especially entrenched in the laity, which thinks our battle is against the Papist. Are they right?

The collect raises a potential preaching point. We can talk about Luther as if he was the Holy Spirit's work of protecting and defending the Christians of the 16th century. This is true. Praise God! But we also might want to put that into some tension because the Spirit of God is still doing that. Sometimes solutions become the next problem. Do we need to have our folks leave this Sunday glad that God is still doing this? Do Lutherans need to see that God is at times guiding and leading us because we desperately need us to do that today? Are we so sure that we are right?

Ultimately this comes back to asking what we are as a Synod and as a whole Lutheran movement. (I really hate the word "denomination.") We are defined by our enemies. If our enemies are really to be found in the demonic powers that have always arrayed themselves against God's people, then what does that say about how we do battle? What does that mean we find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with Roman Catholics in the fight against abortion or decrying the abuses of a society that has given permission to homosexuals to prey upon our children? What does it mean when our gifts to Lutheran World Relief are supporting Catholics in Africa and their gifts to Catholic World Relief are supporting Lutherans in Asia?

The collect, if prayed honestly, is not an easy one. It is especially raising interesting thoughts on this festival of the Reformation, a time when we thank God for rising up to defend his Church against rot within and enemies of the Gospel. Has he achieved the goals of the sixteenth century reformers? Are we like soldiers fighting battles against a vanquished foe who has since become an ally? In that struggle has our enemy shifted and we missed it?

Thus, we ask whether the Reformation and this prayer are really a call for Lutherans to repent? Of what shall we repent? Have we been inattentive to the truth and grace? Do we imagine that we are strong enough to face temptation ourselves? Do we imagine that we can name the enemies and therefore retain control? Is our real problem actually the first element of the prayer? Do we chaff against the gentle ministration of the Holy Spirit, have we simply drunk too deeply of the spirit of this age? If we were simply more adept at saying what we believe about the Holy Spirit, would there ever have been a Pentecostal or Charismatic movement?

Psalm 46

¹God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
²Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
³though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

Selah

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.
¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"
¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah

Here is the traditional psalm for the day. This is the basis for "A Mighty Fortress" by Luther, the single most translated hymn in all Christian hymnody. No less than 100 different translators have taken a stab at Luther's hymn. A few years ago I was touring temple square in Salt Lake City and when we came into the Tabernacle there, the recording of the choir playing in the background was a recording of them singing this hymn.

Revelation 14:6-7

⁶Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷And he said with a loud

voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

Perhaps the key to this passage on Reformation is to ask what the worship to which we are enjoined is. The way we answer that question will often separate the men from the Calvinists. I believe Luther would have us believe that the highest act of our worship is to confess our sins to God, to say that he is the solution to my most profound problem. The height of worship is to admit my profound need, my helpless state and thus to depend upon God wholly. The highest act of worship is when I cling to Christ's cross. The rest of the stuff which we often call worship, the service to him, the songs, the evangelism, the praise, and the charity are all beautiful and good and they are not to be despised, but it is when we come to him in penitent sorrow and need him that we are worshiping him best.

How shall we worship God this way? What does this sort of worship look like? How do we encourage this sort of worship? Is it time to reintroduce kneeling at the confession? Perhaps not, after all the demographic stats for our congregations suggest that many of the congregants won't be able to get back up! I think we might expand on the confession. We have too often left people with the idea that confession of sins is really the admission of naughtiness. But confession is really about confessing our need and God's help. I am weary, I am sick, I am dying, I am grieving, I am frightened – these are all confessions of things in my life that are not "right." God's grace is for them all.

Too often the new elements which are introduced to worship focus on the praise tunes which are easy to sing and don't dwell on the really depressing stuff of contrition and repentance. We like the praising verses at the end of the psalms, but we usually skip right over those parts of the psalms which remember David's struggle and his problems.

The theme for Reformation here is obviously that the Gospel is eternal and for those who dwell upon the earth. More apocalyptic sorts among the Lutherans have identified this angel with the good Dr. Luther himself. It is not well understood by most Lutherans today that the reformers and their generation were convinced that the end of the world itself was at hand. The whole medieval social structure was unraveling around them and they did not know what to make of it except to believe that God's judgment was at hand. Luther clearly thought it would happen before he died. It was a widely held belief that the world could not go on much longer like this. This explains some of the things he wrote and that he was not terribly interested in systematizing his thought. He just figured there was not much point in going to the trouble if the world would end any day.

Does the Lutheran movement still have this clarion call to make? Do we actually see ourselves that way? In many respects I think a lot of Lutherans are a bit adrift in this respect. We are here, we like being here, we wish some more folks would join us here so that we could pay the bills, but I am not sure that we have always understood why we are here. Many congregations have adopted a great commission oriented theme, with the idea that we are here to bring Christ to the world. That probably would have gotten a nod from Luther, but he would have also found it

baffling. His generation had lived for centuries in a Europe that was almost entirely Christian. The unbeliever was the Turk, the hated enemy.

For this author the question is whether we are talking about a theological movement or a denomination. Movements have much less rigid boundaries, and theological movements essentially are looking for people who agree, not to establish lines of who is in and who is out. Thus, as a movement we rejoice when Timothy Oden espouses a very sacramental view of the world in accord with the Church fathers of the first five centuries (You can read his book entitled “The Rebirth of Orthodoxy.”) Oden is a Methodist by extraction and worships in a Methodist congregation and teaches at a Methodist school. In this regard, however, he is a Lutheran. The Lutheran denomination cares into which offering plate he places his offering and under whose name plate he teaches. Should we? Do we? Why?

John sees an angel flying above the people of the earth with an exhortation to the truth. Who is that angel today? Does his sleeve have to be emblazoned with an LCMS logo cross if we are to listen to him? Does the book from which he reads have to have a CPH logo on the bottom?

Romans 3:19–28

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus (faith of Jesus) Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (faith of Jesus)

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Righteousness of God – what is that? I think it flows off our tongues so easily but I wonder how much people actually understand when the preacher says it. I wonder how much the preacher understands it! Luther initially hated this term, because he thought it meant God’s perfection and the perfection which God expected of us. But he came to another reading of this word. God is righteous not in that he exists righteously, which he surely does, but we call him righteous

because he gives it away. In the same way the Holy Spirit is holy not only in his being, but also because he makes people holy. That is why we call him the Holy Spirit. Of course the Spirit of God is holy, but he is the Holy Spirit because he imparts holiness to us!

Faith = A relationship in which the person trusts, loves, hopes in, etc. The trust and love and hope are not the faith, they are the fruit of that faithful relationship. I like to think of this in terms of my children – they “knew” trusted and loved their mother in the first moments after they were born. The nurse could not calm them in the same as she could. They were safe in her arms, they belonged there.

Remember that in the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible and in Luther’s German faith is both a noun and a verb. It is possible “to faith” God. This is very different than the English expression, “to have faith.” The English suggests that faith is something we possess, a thing which we hold in our heart. But the biblical expression is that faith is something we do, it is something we are, not something we have, like a diploma.

When we talk about the Faith of Jesus it might be helpful to think of Gethsemane. Jesus trusts, loves, hopes in the Father. He “faiths” perfectly. He entrusts his life to God, he does not “grasp” it, but in relationship with this Father goes to the cross.

Is faith germane to both natures of Christ? Is it only his human nature that can faith? Or is the relationship not also something which is part of the divine nature as well.

Just after the Joint Statement on Justification was signed, Pope John Paul II said that he could not abide by an understanding which left intact “Simul Justus et Peccator” (at the same time a sinner and a saint.) But that is the heart of what Luther saw here. We are not justified by works. The works we do are not the reason for God’s love for us, rather the works are the fruit of that love. They belong on two completely different scales, two entirely separate economies. Luther and Lutheranism today sees that to co-mingle justification and sanctification that way will result in the terrified consciences despairing. It is simply bad pastoral practice.

I once heard a great sermon on this day in which the preacher said that he wanted to free me from my vices and my virtues even the virtue of faith! We all want to be rid of the vice which corrupts and kills. Every religion battles against sin that way, not just the Christian. But one way to see how Christianity is different is to notice that we also would be free from the tyranny of our virtues. Today that sounds shocking enough to make a pretty good sermon. We really like our virtues even though they exercise a tyranny over us. We believe that God loves us for our virtues, especially the virtue of faith. With Paul, I want remove your life from the “buy and sell” economy of salvation. Jesus has set us free today, from the both of these.

The contrary to the tyranny of virtue is that rule keeping becomes pure response – not a purchase, not an obligation, but a pure, heartfelt response, the loving gift given to the one who loves me.

This is really the text of the Reformation. It would be while teaching a class on Romans that Luther came to see God's righteousness differently. He had been afraid of God's right-ness, seeing it only as an impossible standard which he could not meet. But while teaching Romans, accessing the newly published Greek New Testament, and reading deeply that he came to understand that God's righteousness was not only a thing which God is, but it also refers to what God does. He makes people righteous.

This brings us to a very interesting situation and frankly why the Church still needs to insist that some who preach this word study it in the original language. The Greek is not quite as cut and dried as the English here makes it out to be. There are two issues here and they are bunched up around the understanding of the word Faith. Luther would have loved this discussion.

The first problem we alluded to earlier. English can only say we "have faith" but Greek says we "faith." The difference is profound. Instead of an object which we possess or even a virtue which we exercise, the Greek articulation of the word implies that we are something. This makes a great deal more sense of what Scripture says than many of our English translations permit. For instance, we are the children of God, we are the sheep of his pasture, we are the branches and he is the vine. We faith when we turn to that God and speak, "Our Father..." We are the sheep who listen to his voice and we are the branches when the love and power of Christ flow through us into lives of service and love for family, neighbors, and even enemies. This is faith, it is not some intellectual idea which we hold but it is simply who we are. What is more, one can faith without being at all aware of it. Faith is not simply the intellectual assent which too often we have made it out to be.

This then leads to the second problem: The Greek is most naturally read not as this and most other translations put this. They usually translate this to imply that in verse 22 and 26 this is talking about my faith in Jesus. This is certainly how Luther understood this and most other translators. But this is not what the text actually says. Luther was following Augustine in this. In fact the Greek allows for and even seems to suggest that this is as about Jesus' faith. The plain and simple reading of this passage, especially at verse 22 is that the righteousness of God is through the faith of Jesus for all who (have) faith. Hence the parentheticals in the text where I changed the translation.

The use of faith in verse 25 is ambiguous, it could go either way, but the clincher is in verse 26. There he uses the word faith in an exactly parallel construction to the way he uses it in 4:16 where the context demands that it be the faith of Abraham. It seems that the salvation which is revealed is revealed in the faith of Jesus.

How are we to understand this? It does require that one pay close attention to our Christology here. For we confess not only Christ's divinity, but also his humanity. To be fully human is to have the capacity to faith. Christ had to believe (the trusting relationship) the promise of God in order to suffer and die a willing victim on our behalf. He was not going to some sort of sham death, but the real thing. Dead is dead and no one is more helpless than he or she is when a corpse. Jesus did not raise himself from the grave. The Bible is pretty clear on this. The Father

raised him from the grave. He went into that grave believing. What is more, the whole garden scene seems to suggest that this was not a simple or easy thing for Jesus to believe. He struggled in that garden; to the point he sweated drops of blood.

Now, does this have legs to preach? It might, but be careful here. You may just be stepping on some pretty sensitive toes on this. Before I preach this, I would be very careful with it. For many in your congregations the idea that Jesus has faith may seem a little far fetched, but I think that is more a reflection on just how Eutychian we have become. (Eutyches said that the humanity of Jesus was swallowed up in the divinity, like a drop of honey in the sea.) But the good news in this take on Romans is quite profound. Even though our own faith is often weak and inadequate of itself, Jesus' faith was not. Just as he fully repented of all our sins in the Jordan River when he was baptized, it appears that even our faith is an occasion for him to do the heavy lifting here. We would blow that too. So much for semi-Pelagianism! I can't even believe very well.

Sermon Theme:

Faith Alone – No, not mine, His Faith Alone! (Goal: That the hearer be invited into the relationship which Jesus shared with the Father.)

This sermon starts off with the fear that many of us have that if I am saved by faith alone, I wonder if my faith is really good enough. I know Jesus says that even mustard seed faith is enough, but how do I know I even have that? How do I know that what I have is really faith and not just some self-deception? Or perhaps the real self-deception is that I am not worried about this. I am pretty sure that my faith is actually good enough, all by itself. I imagine that God is somehow responding to my faith just because he likes faith, he thinks that it is a good thing and I have some. This latter is certainly the way that many folks understand this.

This fear is really a reflection of Calvin's distortion of what Luther and Melanchthon said and that distortion then further distorted by those who followed Calvin. Calvin started with the idea that all who believed will be saved, but then he leapt to the conclusion that one needed to ascertain that one had faith. Luther immediately saw the problem here. Luther felt that all men were liars. And he included himself in that! He could not trust his own attestation of his own faith. So he had to locate this outside himself – in God. For Luther and Lutherans, one does not need to be aware of faith to believe. Belief is looking toward Jesus not looking toward my faith.

The problem with the fearful questions and the assumptions that lie behind it is that this has taken the focus off Jesus and put it on me and my faith. Faith looks to Jesus. Of itself, faith doesn't do anything, but it is a relationship in which God does something, in fact, he does everything. Luther would say that we are utterly passive in this regard. God is not responding to my faith, he is giving me faith, in fact, he has given to me the perfect faith of Jesus. I may call God "Father" with complete honesty, not as some conceit, with a nudge and wink, because we all know that I am not really God's son.

In what one of my professors once called the “great switcheroo” my sins have been given to Jesus, and his perfection, including the perfect faith he has in the Father, has been given me. This sermon really wants to say that faith is not something I gin up by trying real hard to believe, but it is a gift, a sweet and simple gift, which God has given me.

You might want to remember that infant who trusts his/her mother more than the nurse. This is not a thing the baby decided to do. He did not will him/herself to faith. It was a gift given by the loving nurture of that woman in her own womb, as the child heard that voice, learned that scent, was safe, and came to trust that mother. It started with the mother giving the gift, taking that child up within herself, feeding, protecting, etc. Until the day when the child rested in her arms. The little child who says “Daddy” or “Mommy” is expressing the relationship, not creating it with those words. It is an expression of “I faith.” When I confess the creed or in some other way claim God as my own, I am not making him my God, I am responding and expressing that faith.

If you want to read more of this, go to a wonderful, recently published commentary on Romans by Katherine Grieb which was written as part of her doctoral dissertation but intended for a lay readership. It is not technical and she is a good writer. If you want to dig a little deeper, consider Luke Timothy Johnson’s recent commentary on Romans as well. He actually originated this re-reading of Romans in terms of faith.

This also has serious implications for understanding Romans 1:16-17. This is really the thesis statement for the whole book and in there is a strange phrase in Greek “The righteousness of God is revealed out of faith into faith.” Most of our translations try to put that into something of an idiomatic English, but it really doesn’t say what they say. Literally it says that God’s righteousness is revealed out of faith (the faith of Jesus) into faith (that would be our faith). This is really taking seriously what the Hebrews writer says when he calls Jesus the “Author and Perfector of our Faith.” The other passage in the Pauline corpus that deals with this is Galatians 3:11-14 where again the Greek is most clearly read to suggest that this righteousness comes from the faith of Jesus.

This section of Romans is essential to the argument of the whole book. In Romans, Paul posits that there are two opposite kingdoms at work. The old “law” once possessed us. We were enslaved to its kingdom/rule. Now, the new kingdom/rule/law has entered in, and we are now citizens of this new kingdom. That kingdom breaking in and laying claim to me makes a real difference on us. Paul is very much the moral optimist in this regard. He really does think that this will make a profound change in the way that we live our lives. That is not just wishful thinking for him. The renewing of the mind in chapter 12 is a profound redirection of the human being. This sharing in the faith of Christ, this participation in the relationship of the Son to the Father makes each of us different than we were before.

The preacher will want to keep a couple of things in mind for this text: What is the difference between a free lunch and cheap lunch? In one sense of course salvation wasn’t free, it cost a

great deal, the very life of Christ. It is free to me, however. We don't want to preach a cheap grace, but a precious grace.

I have undoubtedly confused you here. But think of it as an incentive to come to the Tuesday discussion group.

I have sometimes used this occasion just to do a little Reformation vocabulary. We often use words, sling them around like jargon, but I bet our folks really don't know what they mean.

Justified – made straight like the margins of a text on the computer. When I justify the right margin, the words all line up. I have been justified, made straight with God.

Righteousness – I like to take out the “eous” and create a neologism: Right-ness.

Faith – the relationship God has established in which he calls me his child and he rescues me.

Salvation – rescue – this is what the firefighter does when he pulls me from the burning building. This is what the life guard does when I am drowning.

More?

How do we fit this into the world of our hearers? Is the existential “God problem” without traction? But perhaps this is where to fit in our friend from earlier, John Fredric the Magnanimous. This relationship with God meant that whether he was sitting on a throne or sitting in a cell this relationship defined him. He was a child of God, no matter what. He was in the faith of Jesus. He did not need to boast or hang onto his pride. He could be magnanimous in defeat and from prison urge his people to save lives and work inside the problematic situation they now faced. He could have railed against his captors and claimed his lost glory. But he did not. From prison he graciously lead his people through a letter writing and publicity campaign. When he got out of prison he was a bigger man than when he went in. (In his later years he would become quite a large man, but that might have been due to his affection for bratwurst.)

Do we point to the ways that this truth has changed people's lives? Isn't that really how we make this applicable to today. We point them to folks who do not operate in a righteousness of the law, but the righteousness of God, the right-ness which is theirs through the faith of Christ.

John 8:31–36

³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

What does it mean to abide in Jesus' word? I think too often we make this into a new Law – Read your bible or your not really a disciple! But abiding in the word of Jesus is trusting him. He has promised to listen to your prayers. You abide in that promise when you pray. He has described you as a forgiving person who speaks with God's authority when you forgive sins, so you forgive. That is to abide in that word. Yes, of course, reading the bible is one way we abide, but it is not the only way. The written word is important as the defining and normative revelation of God, but that Word who is Jesus is present in all sorts of things and ways.

Last time when we looked at this text we wondered: From what has God set us free? What sins bind us today? Is it fear? Is it addiction? Is it my health? Is it the tyranny of my virtue? Jesus is the Truth, Jesus sets us free. He goes with us. Armenio spoke of how his people fear the INS. What does it mean that Jesus sets them free? Is it not true that Jesus was walking with them when they crossed into this land? Is he not also with them here? Will he not be with them no matter what happens? Jesus abides in them, and they abide in him. He is bigger than the INS, he is bigger than the poverty which drove them out of their homes in the first place, and he is bigger than any problem they may be facing and anything which they fear. I cannot promise that knowing Jesus will keep you from being deported. I can promise you that no matter what happens, Jesus, who walked the dusty roads of Galilee and whose hands were calloused in a carpenter's shop will go with you, work through you, and work for you. It is not a life of safety I promise, nor even a life of ease. I can only promise a life of God's child who can say no matter what has happened that no one can take that away from me, not the INS, not the Devil, not Death.

One can also talk about free in terms of free versus the idea of at a cost. What is the price we would pay for heaven? Would it be the price of our good life? We know that is insufficient. Is it the price of our faith? To do so is the cheapen heaven itself. God's love, his favor, his heaven, is not for sale, it is freely given, it is free, at least to me. Jesus has paid the only price that can purchase that ticket. My joy as a preacher today is to proclaim the price has been paid, the ticket purchased, it is in your hand by virtue of the baptism in which God claimed you as his child.

John gives us a moment of conflict to ponder today in the light of the reformation. Jesus has a number of folks who believe in Him and yet he seems to be pushing them away. They want Christ on their own terms and he just won't give it to them. He would set them free, but they cannot accept the fact that they are not already free. In terms which we are more familiar with he would forgive them, but they are wondering what they have to be forgiven of?

There is a banality to their claim. Don't they remember their Passover meal? Isn't that what it is all about? "When we were slaves in Egypt..." says the eldest to the youngest person present.

Jesus words are marvelously coherent with our reading of Romans above. We participate in the faith of the Son in the Father. It is not a separate faith we have, but it is Jesus' own faith, the faith which enabled him to shoulder the cross and bear our sins to Calvary. We are not slaves in the household of God, but sons, not because we deserve that but because we have been given the faith relationship which the Son has with the Father.

That means something. Like Jesus we remain in the house forever. Jesus was cast out of the house, suffered sin's and sinner's terrible fate so that when raised from death he might incorporate sinners into that house.

The son has set us free, that means we are free indeed. He has given us his faith, and that means we have the faith of heaven itself. This freedom was won on a cross long ago, but it is won eternally. We are free indeed. You might do a sermon on that phrase.

Or Matthew 11:12-19 (We get an optional Gospel this day)

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

¹⁷"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

I am thinking that this text might benefit from a little expansion. The reading is supposed to end at verse 19, but if you take it ten more verses there are some really interesting things in there. In verses 20-24 Jesus calls down judgment on those who won't listen. But at verses 25 – 29 Jesus brings children into the situation. Luther famously said in the Smalkald Articles that even a seven year old could figure some of this out. And then he uses that marvelous verse about rest. Perhaps that is just my overworked body and mind coming to the fore right now, but the gospel as rest seems like the perfect metaphor for today. Luther loved the legal metaphor, I am thinking that this frenetic age would respond much more to the posture-pedic metaphor.

This is an interesting one for Reformation day. It seems to be resonating with the Epistle lesson. The law and the prophets attest to the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus. But the world does not accept the message. This generation can find fault with just about anything. John fasts and is called demonic. Jesus eats and is called a glutton. There is no winning with this bunch of people!

What shall we say? The Church is always in need of reformation. Luther said we are all like drunkards trying to mount a horse. We overshoot the saddle and end up in the mud on the other side. Christ and John call that generation to reform and call this generation to reform, the question really is not whether we need to reform but the question is on which side of the horse are we lying. John will be rejected because he played the funeral dirge that interrupted their party. Jesus will be rejected because he is not “spiritual” enough and hanging out with the tax collectors and sinners. Like children who won't play a game, the people of their day won't play. Will we be found with the libertines who find the rigors of discipline to be demonic and so find an excuse for their pleasures? Or will we be found among the Pharisees who can only see the externals of a man's life and call them all drunkards and gluttons? Will we take perverse pride in our suffering and deem ourselves more worthy for calling ourselves wormy sinners who at least know it? It seems that we will be found on one side or another. Where are we? Perhaps the enemy has lulled us into thinking we have it straight and that is the most dangerous place to be.

John's preaching is that of Elijah. It remains pertinent to this day too. Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. “Reform!” “Repent!” they really are the same thing. The death of John is told in the verses which precede this. It is interesting that John was killed by the pleasure seekers. He called Herod's marriage to his brother's wife immoral. Jesus will not be killed by the ostensibly violent of his day, the zealots, but by the establishment who thought his message would rock their boat too much.

Jesus says that John's word was a Godly word. If you have ears to bear it, it is the truth. It is also interesting that he does not bind the hearer to believe that John was the one to come. He allowed for latitude on that one. But what was not in doubt was that the kingdom of heaven is at

hand. This was the great message of Romans and the great message that Luther brought as well. One did not need to be a priest nor a monk, but a farmer or a factory worker could be serving God just as well. The kingdom of God is at hand indeed. You live in it with every breath you take and every deed and word which is done and spoken for his sake. But do we have the ears to hear that our whole life is now in that kingdom? Will we always find an excuse to say no like the generation of people at whom Jesus shakes his head? Christ has come to save sinners, don't be surprised that he has found a few, including you. Don't be surprised that your life continues to need reformation. Don't be surprised that despite your life, He keeps engaging you and other sinners. For wisdom is justified by her deeds. Jesus is shown to be in the right by what he has done. The cross and more importantly the resurrection have demonstrated his wisdom. He has made a great and mighty people out of a handful of fishermen and tax collectors. These sinners have grown to be the largest movement the world has ever seen. His deeds have indeed been justified.

Law

1. The culture has taught us that we are autonomous individuals who have affiliated with a faith community as an act of our free will. If it ceases to “please” or make me happy, I am out the door. I may not even tell the pastor that I am leaving.
2. The enemy – when tolerance is simply a mask for acceptance and approval. Is it love when we don't challenge the divorce or the music on the radio or the TV on our screen? Have we in so doing really denied them the ability to repent by telling them that this is not a sin? Has liberty become a license for sin? Do we follow only the rules that are convenient or acceptable? To accept the sin is to deny both the repentance and the forgiveness.
3. Is there a theological toleration that the American scene forces upon us? “Don't we all believe in Jesus?”
4. The enemy part II – we can also be so concerned about the rightness of our words or our theology that we lose sight of the fact that right doctrine is in service to the gospel message. The Pharisees were terribly right.
5. An honest survey of my life concurs with Paul – I too am in serious need of reformation – My life is altogether too subject to the rule of sin. (we all have fallen short...)
6. This world tempts me to hold faith as an intellectual assent, made by that autonomous human being, an act of will in which I choose God and welcome him into my life, but

it then comes back to me. If I know the catechism the right way, I am a Lutheran. But is that faith?

7. The enemy is very adaptable. The methods he used in the 16th century are very different from the methods he uses today. Like the AIDS virus, the drugs of yesterday are no longer effective, but he is still the same deadly virus.
8. We remain in need of reformation. It is not a deed accomplished but a process we will not end until the day he brings it to completion.

Gospel

1. The kingdom of God has broken into this world and now my whole live is governed by the gracious king who is Jesus.
2. That kingdom unites us to the people who sit in this room.
3. The King has given me life. Like a new born babe can recognize the woman who gave him/her life, so too we are given to know God, that is faith. The baby trusts that woman because of the amazing gift of life/love that she has given her. Our faith is not some act of our will or our intellect, but the relationship that God has established in the work of Christ on the cross.
4. The good stuff from yesterday, the sola's of the Reformation have a genius in that they are still applicable. The enemy has changed his methods, but the truth has not changed. God's grace and the faith he has established and the promise he has made in Scripture are just as valid today as they were five hundred years ago.
5. God engages in the fight against the enemy. He keeps, defends, and protects his church. We can with boldness engage the enemy. The victory does not rest on our shoulders, but the privilege to engage in the fight is ours. The joy of this is that in our engagement in the fight we get to see God save people. Sinners need admonishment, the repentant need the good news proclaimed. The weak need strength, the fearful need encouragement.
6. God's Word saturates us with His love. It speaks a marvelous truth which does not accept the sin but forgives it and the sinner.

Sermon Themes: Here are some ideas we kicked around in years past, lets talk about one of them or create another on Tuesday.

Reformation Today – God’s people are perpetually in reformation *To think that we have been reformed, is to be in need of reformation. The blessing here is that God continues to pour out that Spirit upon his church and creates in us the faith that reshapes and reforms our lives. The individualism of today vs the community he creates. The Lutheran Confessional documents really stress this humility. We are always sinner and saint, we have never arrived and yet we are secure in our status before God. To say that we are always reforming is not a sign that we are somehow failing, but it is an attestation that God is still working. Because God has made the amazing promises he has to us means that we can honestly and cheerfully face up to our faults and our failings. There is not a thing I have ever done that is bigger than the love of Christ for me or His cross. I can always be asking myself how his grace takes new shapes and new forms in my life. I never need to feel that I have something to lose in this. I am simply a loser, but God is a great giver. I will count on that, not on my ability to get it right.*

Reformation Today – Carrying the battle to the 21st century. *The faith God creates is not my work, but the faith of Jesus, graciously given to me. It seizes me, it changes me. God’s kingdom confronts and conquers the foe, even the foe that resides in my life and the garbage that oppresses me and my life.*

Reformation Today – Sola... (choose your sola – they could each be preached in this day as much as they fit Luther’s day) *Just keep it Christ’s work and not mine, and that sermon has legs to preach.*

Here’s the theme we came up with last year:

1. By Grace Alone! (That the hearer would believe that God has set them free from the burden of sin, from the burden of fear, from any enslavement, every enslavement. The truth, Jesus, has set us free and we are free indeed.)

Jesus says that anyone who sins is a slave to sin, only the son can remain in the house, the slaves are all booted out. Jesus alone has a freedom to give us. No one else can give that freedom to us, not ourselves, not anyone.

Because we enjoy so much freedom here, we often don’t really appreciate our freedom very much. In many places in the world, one has to have permission to travel, papers which the citizen has to carry with him/her. One cannot just build a church, proclaim the Gospel, or other things we just assume. This has in a strange way constricted our sense of freedom. Because we don’t have our freedoms challenged or impinged upon, we devalue the freedom we have. Like the Jewish audience whom Jesus confronted, we are apt to say that we don’t need a liberator, we have freedom and in the same moment turn around and enslave ourselves.

That said, even though we are outwardly free, we are also enslaved and the preacher should be aware that this should be offensive to the hearer. We don't like to hear this. We are enslaved in a number of ways by sin. Sin is anything that is not in God's perfect creation of the world. The most obvious would be an addiction, but most of the folks we are preaching to won't admit an addiction to sin, as honest as that might be. Above we read that Armenio spoke of how his people were gripped by fear of deportation. It grabs their life and controls them. Jesus would set them free. For a more traditional or elderly congregation it could be the fear of failing health, senility, wasting away in a nursing home, financial insecurity, crime. This fearful life can consume us. It can dictate our every move, crippling our joy, closing the world in around us. These things burden us and enslave us. Jesus has come to set us free. The preacher may well want to expand the idea of the confession we talked about earlier in the notes.

These things ultimately get in the way of Christ in our life. They are intended to. Our enemy who has always had our woe in mind has planted this fear, fed it, and continues to whisper in our ears. That serves his ends because that fear serves to obscure Christ, it hinders his good work. When I am afraid, I will hunker down and close myself in, losing the Gospel eyes with which Jesus sees the world. It keeps us from having life, and having it to the fullest. Our fear will close up our wallets, close up our mouths, close up our hearts, close up our eyes and ears. It is hard to listen to someone speak when we are afraid. It is hard to love when I am afraid. It is hard to serve when I am afraid.

Jesus is the Son, the Truth. He says, I am the Truth! He can set us free, he does set us free, in the cross he has set us free. For Armenio's people the truth is that Jesus is bigger than the INS and the poverty which drove them to leave their loved ones and their homes behind. He is bigger than the death we fear, the pain, the suffering, the loss of control, and the humiliations we endure.

The joy of this is that Jesus love is utterly unconditional. We can proclaim to fearful, sinful, broken people of every stripe that they are free. Jesus does not care what we have been or said or done. The enemy's attempts to make you afraid with your guilt are empty and meaningless. Jesus is the Son, the Truth, and He sets us free, and we are free indeed.

The freedom that is yours and mine in grace means some very real things for us. Sin never can condemn us in Christ again. My guilt, and the debt it imposes on me has been wholly paid. I am free of that need/burden/obligation. Be aware that this is often very difficult to convey and the preacher may well want to expand on this. Our ability to self-condemn is potent.

That freedom in turn means I am free to forgive freely as well. The freedom which Christ bestows makes me a gracious person. I have been give a great treasure to share, a treasure which like love does not diminish with the giving, but expands in the giving.

This Christ-given freedom makes me bold in service. I won't always get it right, but I am forgiven. We can sin boldly in this sense. I have a confidence which comes because the Son himself has set me free. I am not concerned about that status before God.

The freedom of the Christian also means I am free from the crippling fear of the future. What will happen to me? I don't always know. But I know God will be there too and he loves me.

2. By Faith Alone (Epistle – That the hearer would rest and rejoice in the gift of faith which God has given them in Christ.)

What do we understand is the opposite of faith alone? We often posit faith as opposed to works, but the man who is working his way to heaven, has faith in something. He just trusts his works. You can have faith that when you die you just dissolve. That is a sort of faith too. What is opposed to faith for our people? I think most often the issue is really with the faith in Jesus mixed with something else. We often are afraid to trust that Jesus really has done what he said he has done. He did not just die and rise a long time ago, but he died and rose for you and me. Jesus listens to our prayers right now. Jesus is present in this sacrament right now. Jesus is speaking through these words, right now. You might just want to take them into the rite of confession on pg. 292-3 in LSB. The question at the top of pg. 293 is important. "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" Jesus said it was. We trust that he was speaking the truth. So we confess those sins and listen to that absolution. Faith alone is listening and trusting that one who speaks to us.

People often wonder if they have faith, in fact they are sometimes terrified by that question. They don't know what faith is, but they know they need it to be saved. And in those moments when our hearts and minds turn to death and life eternal we might be troubled to hear that faith is required of us. If we don't know what it is, how can we have it? This sermon should set those fears at rest. Faith alone should not raise our anxiety but calm it down.

Even worse our world actually has something of a terrible answer to the question of faith. The world around us understands faith to be a virtue, a thing which we should be able to gin up if we just tried hard enough. But can we? How does one do that? I am utterly incapable of this faith.

So we might need to start with the definition of faith. It is the relationship in which we love and trust and depend upon God. Those things are not the faith, they are the fruit of the faith. The relationship is the faith.

Now here is the really good part, the faith we have is not our own. We did not make it, God did. We have the faith of Jesus, the relationship of the Son to the Father. By his incarnation, by his death on the cross, by his resurrection, he lives the relationship with God, the perfect life, which all of us need. Then, he gives it to us. It is Calvinism which demands that we ask whether we have faith. Luther always said that one could believe in

God and not be aware of it. The child who trusts the mother who holds him does not reflect on that trust. He just trusts. That is much more like faith than the intellectual introspection which considers such trust. With this sermon we need to be careful we don't turn faith into a new burden. It needs to be the freely given gift of God which he bestowed in baptism. The much better question is not about faith, it is about whether your head was wet with the waters of baptism.

For Armenio's culture, they often place their trust/love/affection in someone other than Christ. It might be the Virgin, it might be the priest, it might be someone else. But it is not just Hispanic culture which struggles with this. Good old Lutherans can have faith in their Lutheran-ness or their confirmation or their church. But the faith we have received is the faith of the Son to the Father. We don't need another intermediary between ourselves and God. We have the faith (relationship) of Jesus in the Father. It is because we are there, God hears our prayers as if Jesus spoke them. Because we are there, God has counted the very hairs upon our head and loves us with unending love. The faithful person is simply trusting that God means it when he says that.

The faith of Jesus is very specific in its object. We of course will turn this back into a law if we are not careful and start to wonder if we have the right faith and if it is on the right thing/God. But that is of course our old enemy playing his tricks on us again. When we are tempted to question our faith, our eyes turn to Jesus. It is his faith. His faith is always capable, always pure, always right. That is the gift he gave us in his baptism, that is the relationship we enjoy.

We can rest in that faith. We can rejoice in that faith. We can live in that faith. Amen!