

28 October 2007
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Not Just History”

Text: Romans 3:19-28 (John 8:31-36; Revelation 14:6-7)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, as we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation, the thoughts of most people tend to Martin Luther, or the 95 Theses, or the struggles with the Pope, or the Book of Concord, or some of the many other things that were taking place at that time in history. And that is all important and good to think about. . . . But there is also a great danger in that. For if we remember and commemorate the Reformation as simply a piece of history, then the Reformation has failed. For the church always needs reforming. Not that God has failed her! That could not be. No, the church always needs reforming because *we* always need reforming. We who have been deformed by sin, conformed to the world, and informed by wrong wisdom and thinking – we need to be reformed. For sinners we are. Sinners always trying to make God and His Church into our image; into what *we* want it to be.

And so it is good, right, and salutary today to celebrate the Festival of the Reformation not in the *past* tense, but in the *present* tense. Not as a completed action, but an ongoing one. And to begin with ourselves. To take the beam out of our own eye, before trying to take the speck out of our brother's eye. (Mt 7:3) To shut our mouths and open our ears. To repent and let the Word of God have its way with us. For that is the place of the church and what the church does when she is being most herself – calling sinners to repentance, to receive the forgiveness of their sins; to receive their Saviour. For the church is not about one's rights; it is not about health and wealth; it is not about liberation, social justice, or even morality. It is about forgiveness. If that is not what the church proclaims, then the church is not being the church, and we have either added to Christ what should not have been added, or taken away from Christ what should not have been taken away, or both.

And so we need to repent, that we might be reformed. We need to shut our mouths and open our ears, that the Word of God have its way with us. For through the

Word that we hear and the Word that we eat comes the Word made flesh, our Saviour Himself, to work in us and live in us and set us free through the forgiveness of our sins. Free from our enemies. Free from ourselves.

And so we heard today from Romans chapter 3 – words that I like to call God’s divine “Shut up!” For to be the church is to listen before we speak. To listen to the life-giving Word of truth. To listen to the One who speaks and it is so. To stop trying to defend ourselves and justify ourselves. To stop trying to tell God what is right and what is wrong. To stop trying to tell God how things should be, and what a good person I am. No! Stop. Because here, in our Lord’s Church, where things are right in a very wrong world – here, our Lord speaks and we listen. And His Word has His way with us. . . . And only then do we have anything worthwhile to say. For only when we “same say” back to Him or to our neighbor what He has said to us do we speak the truth. **The truth which is a confession, not an opinion.** The truth which comes from Him, and not from the depths of our sin-filled, self-centered hearts.

And so we heard today from Romans chapter 3: “*Now 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.*” (v. 19) Or in other words, the Law of God is His divine “Shut Up!” to you and me. It is the mirror that shows us our real selves, and says to you and me: **You may be respectable, but you are not holy.** And there is a great difference. For you may be respectable in the eyes of the world, and considered good, and praised by all, *but that is only because you haven’t been found out . . .* what you’re really like . . . the sin, the evil, lurking in your hearts. But God knows it. And it isn’t like you’ve just messed up here and there – it is, as we heard in the Gospel, that you are a *slave* to sin. And maybe worse yet, a slave that doesn’t even know you’re a slave! A slave insisting that you’re really free! But that doesn’t make it so, no matter how many times we say it.

And so it is true. We have been deformed by sin, conformed to the world, and informed by wrong wisdom and thinking – and we need to be reformed. “*O almighty God, merciful Father, I am a poor, miserable sinner . . .*” (Confession, Divine Service 3, LSB p. 184) I have no defense, no justification, no good reasons, explanations, or extenuating circumstances. I am not holy. I am guilty.

And now, another thing – now you are listening! For shut up by the Law, your ears are open. The unholy ones before the Holy One, to hear the Word He wants to

speak to you more than any other: His Word of re-forming forgiveness. Or in the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Is 40:1-2) And so Paul continues with such words of comfort in Romans 3:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [a substitute] by his blood, to be received by faith.” (vs. 21-22a)

And thus we are reformed! The holiness that we are not, is given to us, as a gift. No word or deed of ours can accomplish that; but *every* word and deed of Christ Jesus did. **For His every word and deed points to the cross, and flows from the cross.** The cross which is never past tense, but always present tense! Because while the cross is history it is never *just* history, but that which gives life still today. For the blood that flowed from the cross, from our Saviour’s hands and feet and side . . . is now the blood in His Font, and on His Altar, and in His Word, giving the precious gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation won for us there.

+ For it is His blood that washes us clean, raises us to new life, and makes us His sons in Holy Baptism.

+ It is His blood that fills the Word of Absolution with its resurrecting power and life.

+ It is His blood that fills the chalice on the altar, poured over our lips and into our bodies, to strengthen us in faith and re-form us to the image of our Saviour.

And through all these gifts, we are set free by the Son. Free from all our enemies, not just *some* of them. **Sin** forgiven and atoned for, **death** overcome in resurrection, and **the devil** defeated and stripped of his power, once and for all. . . .

All of that is ours (as we heard in the Holy Gospel) as we abide in His Word. For to abide in the Word is to abide in the Son, who sets us free. Making us through death and resurrection what we were not before – His disciples, who know the truth, and who have been set free. (John 8:31b-32)

And only thus raised and re-formed by being given a new life - now we speak! And are **bold** to speak, for now we have something to say. The truth. The praise of Him who has done such great things for men. That now, like Christ, *our* every word and deed point to the cross (that's our confession) and flow from the cross (that's our love). And living in the cross, we begin to do that which we could not do before - the good works of the Law our Father would have us do. Because we are no longer under the Law, being crushed by it, but set free from it, to now live it. Our Saviour having fulfilled it for us, that we might now live - out of His grace - for others.

And that's what the Reformation was all about. And still is. To put us in our place. To remind us that when we say that we are saved *by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Scripture alone*, it is to take us out of the picture - and remind us that it is all the work of God for us. All gift. A gift that we receive. A gift that we now live. And that is the *eternal Gospel* we heard of in Revelation, that though it be obscured, covered, ignored, denied, or set aside - at various times and in various ways - will *never* be taken away. For where God is His gift is. Where God is His Word is. Where God is His Gospel is. His Gospel which sets us free, and is our only hope, both now and forevermore.

In the name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.