

Reformation Sunday 2023

“There’s a new sheriff in town... Grace”

Today we celebrate the Reformation in church. When I think of the Reformation I think of an old western movie. I imagine a scene of a new sheriff coming into town to put things right... maybe like the sheriff in Blazing Saddles. Someone in the background might say to the church, “There is a new sheriff in town... and her name is Grace”.

The Reformation sparked a whole new way of thinking in the church about how we are saved or put in a right relationship with God. We are now saved by grace through faith on account of Christ alone... and not the laws of Moses.

The Reformation came about when Luther translated and studied scriptures like our Romans 3 text for today. 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. Did you hear that language of gift? God, the giver, chooses to give Christ to the world order to free us from our bondage to sin and make us right with God.

After his new understanding of the Gospel as a free gift, Luther was fed up with his church, the Roman Catholic church’s practice of selling these things called papal indulgences, certificates of paper that said you were forgiven once you put money in the coffers. They were selling forgiveness in the churches and on the streets **not** because the Bible said so, but by human invention to fund ornate cathedrals and support the lavish lifestyle of the pope. It was devouring widow’s households, for example.

So, on October 31, 1517, the day before All Saint’s Day, 10 days short of his 34th birthday, Martin Luther, the young university professor posted 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Each thesis represented a scholarly claim that challenged the validity and effectiveness of papal indulgences. Luther just wanted to have a scholarly debate. He had no idea that these 95 theses, originally written in Latin, but quickly translated in German, and would become widely distributed because of the invention of the printing press.

As a result, Luther drove the church back to the Bible and ultimately the theology that we are saved by grace through faith, not as a result of our own works, but as a gift of God. But the laws of God still give us knowledge of our sin and drive us to the foot of the cross. Then, everything we do after we say, “I believe”, is known as the Christian life. It is a response to this good news of Jesus on the cross for us. Our works are the actions of love and justice in the world that flow from Jesus’ grace for us.

Sadly, many still believe today that one day, if I’m good enough, I will get to go to heaven. Well, I can proclaim to you today, that no one is good enough... on their own. We confess every week that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. But, by the grace of God, through our faith and baptism in Jesus Christ, we are set free from the idea that someday I will be good enough. The scriptures say that “No one is good but God alone.”

But why is grace so hard to receive? It sounds too good to be true. Maybe it is because most things in our world have to be earned today... or the love we are used to receiving is conditional. We don’t feel we deserve God’s love because we know how wretched we are. But today, we are reminded that love comes down to us to meet us where we are. In the word, fellowship, and Holy communion.

Would you agree that Church is always in need of reform? And that we humans are always in need of reform? Therefore, if the reformation was sparked by an intense study of scripture, the church and we as individuals can be molded and changed by the scriptures. We too can be reformed to be more like Jesus. Luther wanted people to read the Bible in their own language, and not let the church dictate what it says.

So, one opportunity to study scripture is that in November, we are launching a new round of small groups in our church, open to all who want to participate. You can meet in homes, at church, coffee shops, or online. It can be established groups in the church or new groups. It is called “Be like Jesus, Live Like Jesus: Do you ever long for a more loving, peace-filled world?” Like our Psalm 46 today, I long for the God who makes wars to cease in all the world... to act now...

especially in Gaza and Israel/Palestine. The study is 8 sessions in a video/discussion format with built in questions and Bible work. If you are interested in joining or forming a small group, simply put your name on one of the sign-up sheets in the gathering area, and/or sign a whole group up. I plan to meet with group leaders once a month, if wanted, for some supplemental Bible work.

May God's word begin or continue to reform the church and you daily. And may others see Christ working in you as you go about your daily lives. Amen.