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October 25, 2020 – Reformation Sunday
John 8:31-36 and Romans 3:19-28

Romans 3:19-28, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. 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, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

John 8:31-36, “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I bring you greetings...

Gifts –we all like receiving and giving them. I’ve received some neat, creative, thoughtful gifts over the years ...a hand carved cross from my internship congregation, plane tickets for a trip we never could have afforded, and the always wonderful gift of homemade goodies. While I like receiving gifts, I also like giving them. Sometimes I have a hard time waiting for the special occasion, and I want to give it to them the moment I buy it.

And yet, with some gifts that we receive in life, doesn’t it feel like they come with strings attached? Like the gift of 2 nights at a luxury resort – all we had to do was listen to a 90-minute sales pitch presentation. Or I think of the game

show, “Let’s Make a Deal” – where the host would always offer the contestants some prize, but with strings attached – because they had to make a decision of whether to keep it or trade it for what was behind curtain #2. We sometimes give gifts hoping that we’ll receive a gift back in return. Or if nothing else, the gifts we give to others have the strings of expectations attached – we expect the person to thank us for the gift and we expect that they will like the gift.

There is one gift that we receive that has no strings attached – the gift of God’s grace. No one knew more about this gift of grace than Martin Luther. This weekend we celebrate Reformation Sunday in the Lutheran Church – the commemoration of what eventually became a world changing event. In Martin Luther’s protests against the Roman Catholic Church, he was not intending to break away from the church, but was simply trying to reform some of the policies and doctrines that he felt had strayed from the true Biblical principles. This was also the time when the printing press had recently been invented, and because of Luther’s bold actions and unwillingness to back down from the religious and political powers of the day, his words and deeds are credited as being the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, which resulted in the formation of many new denominations over the next several decades.

The one key revelation for Luther that compelled him to risk his own life for his faith and beliefs was the understanding of GRACE that he discovered in his studies. As I said a moment ago, no one knew more about the gift of grace than Martin Luther. The reason he knew so much about grace is because he knew so much about sin.

One could say that Luther was obsessed with sin. Not in the sense that he went out and did every sinful act he could think of, but because his life growing up in the church and then becoming a monk made him realize that he was such a sinful person. Luther dedicated himself to his life as a monk, but his dedication and acts of piety only made him more aware of the things he was doing that he believed were sinful. To remedy the situation, he would go to one of the other monks and engage in long sessions of confession, trying to purge himself of all the sinful acts, so that he could receive pardon and forgiveness. However, Luther’s confession sessions kept getting longer and longer as he realized more and more how unworthy he was.

In order to distract Luther from his obsession with his own spiritual inadequacies, Luther was encouraged to pursue an academic career, which was the first time he had real access to scripture. This led Luther to an in-depth study of the Bible, and a new understanding of the book of Romans. Paul’s letter to the Romans became the spiritual light bulb that went off in Luther’s head. Through this letter, a portion of which we heard today, Luther realized that it was true that he would never be “good enough” to earn Christ’s redemption. He was a sinful person incapable of resisting the temptation to sin. But, that is where the concept of grace

comes into play. Verses 23 and 24 are the pivotal turning point in faith which leads us to a greater understanding of how we all are saved, as Paul wrote these words, "...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."

The old notion of salvation was that it was something that could be earned. If you did enough good works, or if you lived each day following the letter of the Law, you would earn your redemption. It was as if there was a heavenly system of brownie points, and the more points you earned, the quicker you'd earn your way into heaven. If I go to church, I earn 2 points. When I bring food to my sick neighbor, I earn another 3 points, etc. The goal was to do more good deeds than bad, so that in the end, you would come out on top when God judged your life.

That might have been the thinking behind the system in place in the Old Testament times – following the Law to be made right with God – but Christ came to change the old way of thinking. Paul says that the only purpose the Law serves is to show us where we have gone astray. The Law by itself was not enough to make a person righteous, because no matter how closely we tried to keep the Law, we would inevitably mess up. Something had to change, since the old way wasn't working. This is where Christ and grace enters in to the picture.

Christ came to bring the world a redemption that we could not achieve on our own through our own good works. We had tried for years and years, and failed time and time again. Therefore, a new chapter in the plan for salvation was revealed. Christ came to take all of the sin of the world upon himself, as the perfect atoning sacrifice, so that we would no longer have to live under the burden of sin and the Law. Through the sacrificial actions of Christ, the sin that had kept us separate from God was now forgiven. We were spared the punishment that we deserved, and instead, Christ took the punishment on our behalf. This is grace.

There is a saying that I used to have hanging in my office which helps me remember the amazing gift that grace is for us:

Justice is getting what you deserve.

Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

Grace is getting what you don't deserve.

I don't think any of us could argue with justice. We know that we aren't perfect all of the time. We make mistakes. We give in to the temptation to sin, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. But either way, we know, deep down inside, that we should have to pay for the things we've done wrong. We know that we deserve justice; but then God shows us mercy. God does not punish us in the way that we deserve. We are spared from God's wrath. We should be ever thankful that we worship a God who is loving, merciful and slow to anger. And yet, through Christ, God takes it a step further. Instead of simply not getting the punishment we do deserve, we receive gifts of grace that we don't deserve. God has given us the gifts of forgiveness, freedom and forever. In Christ, our sin is forgiven. In Christ,

we have been set free from our slavery to sin. In Christ, our sin no longer keeps us separate from God as the gift of eternal life means that we will be with God forever.

Grace – getting what we don’t deserve and receiving something that we can’t earn. In the words of Jesus from our Gospel text today, grace is being set free from sin by the truth of God’s word. It is knowing the truth that our redemption can’t be bought through our good deeds – because it has already been bought with the blood of Christ. This is not a freedom that we use for selfish gains, or as an excuse that we no longer worry about sin because we are forgiven. Instead, it is a freedom that we use to choose how to live our lives as followers of Christ. As we hear in Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:15). Jesus has already done the hard work of defeating sin and death with his own life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection – we now have nothing left to do but be useful to God as we respond to this gift of grace in our lives. Paul and Luther came to know God’s grace in a whole new way in their lives, and they didn’t waste any time in sharing this discovery with everyone. We are better off today because they shared this story with us, and by God’s grace, we have the privilege of sharing our gifts and God’s story with those we meet. Thanks be to God for this gift of grace in our lives. Amen.

Prayers for Reformation Day have been offered by the Lutheran World Federation for use around the world. After each petition you can respond, “Hear our prayer.”

As we commemorate the Reformation this year, we do so in a time of pandemic. With the ecumenical and global family, we bring our prayers for healing. And we join with our siblings of other communions in joint service to the neighbor, in restraint and vigilance, and in shared witness. Let us now pray for the world, the church and all those in need.

God of mercy, throughout history your goodness prevails, open the hearts of all people to discover the deep bond of community. Show us your goodness and mercy that endure forever.

Hear our prayer.

God of peace, bend that which is inflexible, the identity barriers that divide, the attachments that thwart reconciliation. Bring peace in this world, (especially in countries and places named here). Restore wholeness among us and show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God, our healer, come to our aid as COVID-19 continues to spread, heal those who are sick, protect families and friends from being infected. Support those in public health and medical services. Strengthen our resolve to eradicate all diseases, malaria, dengue, HIV & AIDS, and many others. Show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God of justice, hasten justice for those suffering under the power of evil and every form of oppression and greed. Give new life to all. Show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God, rock and fortress, protect refugees, those without homes or security, all the abandoned children. Help us always to defend human rights and dignity. Show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God creator, all creation groans in expectation, convert us from exploitation. Teach us to live in harmony with your creation. Show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God of mercy, strengthen and protect those who are persecuted for faith in you and those of other faiths who suffer persecution. Give us the courage to profess our faith. Your mercy endures forever.

Hear our prayer.

God of life, heal painful memories, transform complacency and indifference, inspire and sustain our ecumenical journey from conflict to communion, all of us branches on the one vine, Jesus Christ. Show us your mercy!

Hear our prayer.

God our sustenance, bring us together at your eucharistic table. Turn us to you and one another. Nurture within and among us a communion rooted in your love. Your mercy endures forever!

Hear our prayer.

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.**

Blessing:

God, creator of all things, speaking reformation into being;
Jesus Christ, savior of the world, raising the dead;
Holy Spirit, living voice, calling and enlightening the church:
Almighty God, Father, ☩ Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever.
Amen.