

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Reformation Day – October 27, 2024
Romans 3:19-28 – Grace, Mercy, and Peace
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Don't let these words slide past you. This is not some bland, formulaic way to start a sermon. I really mean it! Grace, mercy, and peace! What a privilege and joy to proclaim the gifts of God for you in the gospel.

And this is also the theme of Reformation Day. Today is not so much a celebration of Martin Luther or the birth of the Lutheran Church or the anniversary of posting the 95 Theses 507 years ago to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. No, today is a celebration of the Gospel, that in all the ages of the church, the Holy Spirit has always kept the light of the true Gospel burning brightly. Today, we celebrate the church, the city on a hill, which still shines forth as the light of the world. Thanks be to God, among us the Gospel still rings true. "Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

This is the vision of Revelation 14, an 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. An eternal gospel that never dies out. The Word of the Lord endures forever. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, for this mighty, eternal gospel!

Do not take this precious gospel for granted. Many have suffered and died for it – the saints and martyrs and Reformers struggled so that you might hear it today. "I will speak of your testimonies before kings, O Lord, and shall not be put to shame." These words of our Introit from Psalm 119 were precious to the Reformers, because they were called to make the good confession before kings and emperors, tribunals and councils. And they did so fearlessly.

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther refused to recant from the gospel. Threatened by the papal envoys with excommunication, he said, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God." And at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the Lutherans read the Augsburg Confession to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, at great peril to their lives. And in the following years, they gave their lives for their doctrine in the Schmalkaldic War, and later in the Thirty Years' War, a war that caused the death of a third of Germany's population from battle, famine, and disease.

Through it all, the true Gospel was never extinguished. Thanks be to God, we have inherited the true doctrine of Christ crucified, justification by faith alone apart from works of the law.

So we celebrate Reformation Day, not because we love Lutheran culture or because we're stuck in the past, but because the Gospel preached 500 years ago by Luther and Chemnitz and Melancthon and the Reformers still stands firm today. It remains the foundation of the church. Luther preached the same gospel that Paul preached in Romans, the same gospel of Christ crucified that the church must preach to the end of the age.

So hear now the gospel: God has ransomed you, and the whole world, by the blood of Jesus, to give his righteousness freely to you. You were a slave to sin, but the Son has set you free. And truly truly, if the Son sets you free, then you are free indeed.

Believe this truth! Receive the freedom of God, his grace and mercy and peace. For this gospel is received in only one way. Not by anything you do, but only by faith. Simply believe and accept God's gift. Believe it with Abraham and Moses, with the apostles and all the saints.

And the key term that lies at the heart of the gospel is justification. Our epistle lesson today from Romans 3 is all about justification. Paul uses words like just, justify, and justification ten times in this passage.

Justification is a legal term, a courtroom term. It means to carry out justice. A judge executes justice by punishing the guilty and freeing the innocent. So picture a sinner standing before God on judgment day. The courts are seated and the books are opened. The witness testimony is heard, the trial is played out and the verdict is clear. Guilty. Sinner. Condemned to hell forever.

How else can justice be served? How else can the law be upheld? The sinner must die, you must die. For you cannot justify yourself. There is nothing you can do to appease the law and God's righteous demands. So in the courtroom of God's judgment you must stand helplessly, watching your trial with speechless despair. You can say nothing in your own defense.

And it's not God's fault, it's yours. God's law is blameless. He condemns with perfect justice. And we

have only ourselves to blame.

And the law is also clear. The Ten Commandments show us that God's Law goes far deeper than a matter of externals – it's a matter of the heart.

Have you ever been bored or reluctant to hear preaching or study God's Word? Then you are a Sabbath breaker. Have you ever refused to help someone in need, or have you been angry with your neighbor? Then you are a murderer. Have you ever been reluctant to give generously of what God has given you? Then you are a thief. Have you ever neglected to speak up in defense of your neighbor? Then you are a false witness. Or have you ever been jealous or covetous of the success of another? Then you are an idolater, as Colossians 3 declares, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

Truly, there is none righteous, no not one. The law demands justice and righteousness, but it cannot give what it demands. All the world and all flesh are all under sin, and therefore God has put them all under the law, under the justice it demands. So every mouth is shut. No one can boast or speak before God in the courtroom of his justice, because he knows all sin and he condemns it all. All sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.

But when sinners hear the law, when the totality of God's requirements become clear, when the Ten Commandments have done their work and brought you to your knees, then, O Sinner, you are ready for Jesus, and his precious gospel.

For your condemnation would be certain, if not for your advocate. Christ Jesus, your Savior. The man who suffered your just punishment in your place, who lived a perfect life and died a perfect death, who alone is God and possesses the righteousness of God, this man alone is just.

And so the just man died. He died to become the justifier of all flesh, to suffer the just condemnation of the world. He freely chooses to give forgiveness, mercy, and peace to all who believe in him, the free gift of grace.

And now this just man makes you righteous. He justifies, he gives you the righteousness of God. He stands as your advocate, to plead your case on your behalf. In the heavenly courtroom, he puts forward his death as a substitute for yours. He says, "I died in this one's place, my blood covers his sins." And so in him the verdict you hear is one you never deserved, "Not guilty!"

Truly, everything we do and say in the church is designed to teach this gospel, to increase your faith. Many denominations have accused us in the Lutheran church of not going far enough, of only removing ourselves halfway from the papacy. They point out that we retain many ceremonies, like the liturgy, vestments, altars and crucifixes and candles, chanting, and many other practices that seem too Roman Catholic. They object that we encourage people to confess their sins to the pastor, and the pastor announces forgiveness in the stead of Christ. They object to our high view of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, that God truly acts to forgive through these means of grace.

Yet retaining these doctrines and practices does not mean we have come up short. It means that the Lutheran Reformers were filled with wisdom, examining everything carefully in the light of the Gospel. If a practice was found contrary to the gospel, like selling of indulgences or requiring works of satisfaction or making people enumerating every single sin, then the practice was thrown out. But if a practice did confess the gospel, like having an altar and vestments that honor and proclaim how we worship in the presence of the Holy Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world, then we keep it.

We keep these things because they teach us to continually, every day of the Christian life, to continually repent and believe the gospel.

Repent and believe the gospel. Everything we do is focused on that. All of our liturgy, and our worship, and our preaching, and our sacraments, they're all designed to instill faith in the forgiving blood of Jesus in you, to lead you to repent and examine yourself and confess your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, your Savior.

So as Jesus preached at the start of his ministry, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." And Luther said the same in Thesis #1 of his 95 Theses, the very first words of the Reformation, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance."

Repent and believe. Take hold of the precious promises, freely offered to you – grace, mercy, and peace in the blood of Jesus, our God and Savior, the one who is just and the justifier of all who receive him by faith. Amen.