

**Reformation Sunday + October 30, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Romans 3:19-28**

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With eight days remaining in this contentious election cycle, many of us are on propaganda overload. You may be thinking you can't take even one more exaggeration, one more twisting of the facts, one more character assassination. You just want it to be over. But if you think the propaganda has been bad in America in 2016, you should have been in Germany 499 years ago, in 1517, when the Reformation was getting its start at the hands of Dr. Martin Luther, and thanks to the printing press propaganda was a brand-new art.

Luther was vigorously objecting to how the Catholic Church was pulling the wool over its own people's eyes for purposes of money, power, and control. The hot-button issue of the day was the notorious practice of selling indulgences. The Pope was trying to raise money to make St. Peter's Basilica even more luxurious than it already was, and indulgences turned out to be an easy ticket. Hand over your money, the sales pitch went, and your dead relatives will immediately be released from purgatory and purified so they can enter heaven. The most notorious peddler of indulgences was a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel. His slogan went like this: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, so the soul from purgatory springs."

This took advantage of poor people and preyed on their fears, plus the church conveniently played up the horrors of purgatory—like indulgences, a concept with no basis in scripture in which souls were supposedly subjected to horrendous suffering in the process of being purified. Luther's 95 Theses are really just a single compelling argument in 95 lucid sentences for how absurd the idea of selling indulgences actually was. For example, Number 86

reads: "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than richest man in the world, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"

Luther was a man of many words and colorful phrases. Helped immensely by the proliferation of pamphlets, propaganda was born. In pamphlets, drawings, woodcuts and songs, Luther and his circle blasted the Catholic hierarchy. They depicted the Pope as the anti-Christ, caricaturing him as donkey and calling him a lot worse. Catholics fought back, portraying Luther as a cohort of the devil or even the Devil himself. One anti-Luther woodcut shows Luther boiling up a stew of heresy with the help of three devils, producing fumes from the pot labeled falsehood, pride, envy, and so forth.

What the Catholic Church also didn't like was that Luther was encouraging Christians to read the Bible themselves. Until Luther translated the Bible into German, it was known only to those in the upper ranks of society who could read Latin. This was revolutionary and permitted people to learn what the good news of the gospel actually was. That good news can be summed in up a single word: Grace. Luther's breakthrough was to grasp the truth we are saved by God's grace through faith alone, regardless of anything we do or don't do. No action of ours can earn us God's grace, and at the same time nothing we do can deny it to us, because God's mercy and forgiveness come to us as a free gift in unlimited supply. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Scripture alone. That grace comes to us in the form of God's Son.

We desperately need this good news. Luther saw clearly that the reality of human sin had allowed Satan to enter the world and gain the upper hand. Just look at the last half of

Stanza 1 of “A Mighty Fortress”: “The old satanic foe / has sworn to work us woe / with craft and dreadful might / he arms himself to fight / On earth he has no equal.”

This doesn't only concern “the world.” It is our reality every time we are unfeeling, uncaring, thoughtless, or heartless. With every selfish act, the devil's grip on us tightens: That thing we said that we wished we could take back; that thing we did that we knew we shouldn't have; that thing we didn't do, that thing we should have done. Or things we can't help doing, that only end up hurting ourselves and others. Just listen to Paul in Romans 7, who almost gets tongue-tied in trying to explain this:

I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate....In fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

This is the devil at work. This is what being bound in sin looks like. And what does it feel like?

We can't help ourselves, but we also can't forgive ourselves, and therefore we can't forgive others. So things just get worse. Rifts within families deepen, friendships erode, marriages drift toward separation and end in divorce. Closed minds, unforgiving hearts, anger at one's self that gets projected onto others: These are weapons of the devil. This isn't life; these are forms of death.

This is why we need to hear the good news of the gospel as often as possible. In his infinite mercy, God entered human history with a Savior, God's only Son—the Word who had been with God since the beginning of time, but FOR US became living, breathing flesh, to walk among us as the very image of God, showing us in his teaching and ministry what God's kingdom looks like, and to die and rise again, so that we might be released from our slavery to

sin, knowing that life and not death has the last word. THIS is our true get out of jail free card, labeled “Grace,” and the supply never runs out! “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,” Jesus said in our Gospel reading. “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.”

And what is our response to God’s boundless love, mercy, forgiveness? Faith. In faith we receive the gift of grace. And that faith is *itself* a gift—it is not anything we do. We know this from Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this [meaning faith] is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast.”

Faith is the growing, lifelong conviction that God’s grace comes to us in unlimited measure. And what does this growth need? All it needs is NOT saying “No” to God’s grace. Saying “No” means giving up hope, or giving in to despair. Some of us have been or will be tempted to give in to despair by tragic circumstances, such as the untimely death of a loved one. But imagine if you caused a person’s death and were therefore responsible for the death of another person’s loved one. How tempting it would then be then to fall into despair and to refuse God’s mercy and forgiveness!

Faith cannot grow if we refuse God’s grace. I was reminded of this while reading a news story a couple of days ago concerning the sentencing hearing for a drunk driver in Maryland. The driver, Louis, had been on the road a couple of years last December with a blood alcohol level at three times the legal limit and fatally injured a young police officer, Noah, who was making a traffic stop. Louis, by the way, was a repeat offender In the aftermath, Noah’s parents

helped get a bill passed, called Noah's Law, that makes it more difficult for previously convicted drunk drivers to get behind the wheel.

At the sentencing, Noah's mother said, "I've lost my joy, and every minute of every day I am reminded that I lost my Noah and he will never come back to me." She seemed to be walled in by her grief, stuck where she was at the time of her son's death.

But listen to Louis' statement: "I want to say, first, that I am eternally sorry for what I've done. Anything that happens to me is not enough. What I do is I think about your son and your family every night. I pray for his soul in heaven. And I think that your resilience, your courage, and the strength that you show by pursuing Noah's Law is amazing."

In the horror of what he had done, Louis could have walled himself off from the world forever. But his ability to see past the tragedy of his actions suggest that seeds of faith may have begun to grow. Receiving God's grace in faith, allowing himself to experience God's forgiveness, Louis could step outside his grief to see goodness in the world and commend Noah's parents' courage. Receiving God's grace in faith, we are able to act toward others as God's agents.

With this, let's return to Romans 3 from our second reading today: "But now the righteousness of God has been disclosed...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 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."

Thanks be to God, who has given us the victory in Jesus Christ! AMEN.