

+ Reformation Sunday +
500th Anniversary of the Reformation, October 29, 2017
Romans 3:19-28
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
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With his 95 theses, Martin Luther did not set out on October 31, 1517 to change the world or to start a new church. He simply wanted people to know the truth: that the Bible is the Christian's only source of authority, and that the church's corrupt practice of selling indulgences was a complete hoax. An indulgence was a kind of get-out-of-jail free card that supposedly reduced the punishment for sins a dead person would have to suffer in Purgatory before admitted to heaven. But none of this is in the Bible—the church authorities made it all up. Indulgences had been around for a long time. But in Luther's time the pope's heavy spending put the church in debt, so the sale of indulgences was being heavily pushed. Luther's brilliant set of arguments lays bare this hoax. He put on paper what a lot of people had been thinking, and he quickly became a celebrity.

But Luther's impact on the modern world, and on each of us as people of faith, goes far beyond his decision to challenge the authority of the church. I don't know about you, but I would be completely lost without Luther's insight of God's grace as a free gift. Otherwise, I know exactly where I would be: Locked in a prison entirely of my own making, in which I'd be berating myself day and night for all the failures of my life. I'd be miserable and I'd make everyone around me miserable. It might look like anger at God, but really it would be anger at myself for never being good enough, or smart enough, or fast enough or all the things other people am that I am not. All I would know about myself is what I wasn't.

I'd would never accept the person that God created me to be. Then my life would be over, and that would be that.

This same prison is where the young Martin Luther languished as a monk, cloistered in his own cell and tortured by the burden of his own sin. The harder he worked to earn God's favor through acts of penance, the more overwhelmed he was by the inescapable reality of his sin. Later in life he recalled this time. "I lived without reproach," he wrote, "but my conscience was disturbed to its very depths and all I knew about myself was that I was a sinner. I could not believe that anything I thought or did or prayed satisfied God."

But one day, as Luther was studying Paul's letter to the Romans, the floodgates of understanding burst open. Luther's revolutionary insight was that faith comes to us from God through Christ as a free gift, with no strings attached. This releases us from the smothering blanket of our sin and redeems through Christ as holy in God's sight. This free gift is what we call grace. We are saved by grace, through faith. Grace changes everything.

The light bulb for Luther was when he grasped that the righteousness of God that Paul writes about in Romans is not a quality that applies to God, but a characteristic of God, the benefits of which come to us freely through God's Son. Until then, Luther had hated what he thought was a righteous God standing over him in judgment. About this moment of revelation, Luther later wrote that

Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open. An entirely new side of the Scriptures opened itself to me...and I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the loathing with which before I had hated the term 'the righteousness of God'. Thus, that verse in Paul [Romans 1:17] was for me truly the gate of paradise.

Grace changes everything.

What does it mean to you, each of you, to accept that you are fully known, that you are fully loved, and that you are fully forgiven by our God of grace? To know that God desires with all his heart that you return to him so that you can be reconciled with the One from whom you have for so long been separated? Perhaps it means that you are able to love yourself just as God loves you—just as you are—because who are you to say you're not worthy of God's love when you already have it? Perhaps it means that you need never again be consumed with guilt or remorse about the past, because God hears the confession of our hearts and forgives us even before we know we need it. Perhaps it means that what might look like a haphazard path in life, with a career going here and there with lots of unfinished projects along the way, is in fact exactly the path God wanted you on all along, as he calls you to come back to him.

Listen again now to part of our Romans 3 reading:

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.

All have sinned and fallen short; all are now made holy by God's grace as a gift. This tells us that we are all in the same boat. Formerly this boat was sinking under the weight of our sin. But now by grace, through faith and through no action or effort of our own, our boat is pointed toward God under full sail.

How does the church as it is structured today fit into this picture? It doesn't, really. Locked up in our separate buildings under the umbrellas of various denominations, most of us hardly feel as if we're in the same boat heading in the same direction toward God. Instead, we're subjected to conflicting theologies, partisan agendas, and different ways of thinking about whether or not all of God's people are really welcome at the table.

We began by looking back on the past 500 years. Looking ahead, I wonder whether God has something completely different in mind for the church as the body of Christ. What if we were to go back to the future? What if communities of faith returned to the core values of the early Christian church, where love was the goal and humility the way? What if, in humility, people regarded each other as equally precious in God's sight—since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?

What if this attitude spilled out into the culture so that all people came to see that the opposite of love is neither hate nor indifference, but self-righteousness—the attitude in which people stand in judgment on others, condemning them as inferior, just as the Pharisee did with the tax collector? What if this awareness were to burst through the walls of our institutional churches and gather all people together God's love? Could that be the next great Reformation—sooner, we hope, than later?

Grace changes everything.

Could the world be about to turn?

AMEN.