

**Reformation Sunday**  
30 October 2011  
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Ascension Lutheran Church

**“By His Grace”**  
Romans 3.21-24

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

In our lessons this morning St. Paul says to us:

“Now, the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the Law ... the righteousness of God that is ours 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, ***all*** are now justified ***by His grace*** as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3.21-24)

**By His grace!**

We are justified ... ***by His grace***.

We are made right with God ... ***by His grace***.

We are saved ... ***by His grace***.

We are forgiven ... ***by His grace***.

We are made children of God ... ***by His grace***.

We are holy and precious in God’s eyes ... ***by His grace***.

By His grace! Amazing grace! How sweet the sound.

This is Reformation Sunday, the “birthday” of the Lutheran Church. We remember and celebrate the reforming movement launched by Martin Luther. Martin Luther dug deeply into Scripture and realized that the Church of his day had departed from some of the ancient traditions and teachings of the Church, the teachings and traditions that went all the way back to Day 1, all the way back to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on God’s people and the Church was called out from the world. Luther saw the church veering off that path and called the church to come back to the old ways, to the real catholic traditions.

*(My dear brothers and sisters who give their allegiance to the Bishop of Rome call themselves “Roman Catholics” and sometimes we think they have exclusive use of the word “Catholic”, but we Lutherans like to think of ourselves as the “real” Catholics.)*

Luther did not want to break away from the Church. He did not want to start a new church body. He especially did not want those who followed him to call themselves “Lutherans”. (But we do!) We who follow Luther’s lead are a reforming movement within the one, holy, Catholic Church.

Luther called the Church of his day to go back to the authentic Catholic traditions. For example, in Luther’s day priests were not allowed to get married. The Bible talks about Peter and other Apostles being married. Luther lived in the 1500's. Celibacy among priests wasn’t required until the 1200's. To Luther the celibacy of the clergy looked “new fangled” – it wasn’t part of the ancient, catholic tradition of the Church. We should go back, he said.

In Luther's day lay people only received the bread when taking Holy Communion. Luther realized that there was nothing like that taught in Scripture. It was a practice that also started in the 1200's. We should go back to the ancient, catholic traditions of the Church, he said.

The thing that probably bothered Luther the most was that the Church in his day was selling forgiveness. The Church was teaching that, yes, we are saved by God's grace, and, yes, Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins. But, the Church was saying what Jesus did on the cross pays only for the guilt of our sins. We still have to pay the penalty. Jesus earns us God's forgiveness, they were saying, but we have to pay the penalty. And it is a "pay me now or pay me later" system: you pay off the penalty now – or – it will be purged later – or – you could buy the indulgence that would release you from the penalty. You could, the Church was teaching, buy forgiveness.

Martin Luther went back into the Bible and said to the Church "I've re-discovered some very important things. We are saved by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone! And Jesus did it all at the cross. With his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, Jesus paid our debt in full. All of the suffering necessary to pay for sin was done at the cross by Jesus. He bore the penalty, by His stripes we are healed. We can not earn or buy God's favor or forgiveness, and we don't have to: God loves us infinitely and eternally. That is the clear teaching of the Bible. That is the ancient, catholic tradition. That is what we need to return to!"

**Rediscovering that the core message of the Bible is that we are saved only by God's grace was Luther's gift to the Church.**

"Amazing grace" is core message of the Bible. We hear it again this morning in our Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah 31: "The day is coming," God says thru the prophet Jeremiah, "when I will make a new covenant. It will not be like the Old Covenant." The old covenant demanded slavish obedience to a set of rules by which you earn God's favor and make yourself right before God. I will, God says, make a new covenant of grace. "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

That day arrived when Jesus was born. That new covenant was written in the blood of Christ. It is a covenant of grace that says for the sake of Jesus God calls everyone to come home to Him. There is nothing you can do to get God to love you more than that. And there is nothing you can do to get God to love you less than that. Putting that at the center of the life of the church was Luther's gift.

And being a Lutheran today means being a person who knows that God loves every single person in the whole world, and that God extends that love to every one in his son Jesus Christ. Christ has done it all. We can only receive his righteousness as a free gift of God's grace. There are no penalties that we need to pay – Jesus paid it all. There is nothing I can do to get God to love me more than that. I don't have to tithe to get a blessing – I tithe because I have been blessed. I don't go to church to get God to smile on me. I go to church because God smiles on me. I don't do good works to get into heaven. I do good works because Jesus has opened the doors of heaven for me. Jesus has made me God's child and now there is nothing I can do to get God to love me more, and there is nothing I can do to get God to love me less.

And being a Lutheran in today's world means being a person who is willing to share that love with others. We are, as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, ambassadors for Christ. We are his emissaries, his messengers, his spokes-models. God wants every human being to know the love he bears for them in Christ. You and I are to share that love in words and in deeds.

That means we have to “go”, we have to be in motion, in mission. We've got to hit those doors and be out there in the world, God's salt and light for a sin-sick and dying world.

On this Reformation Sunday a lot of Lutheran Churches will have bulletins that have the picture of a castle on the cover. It illustrates the great Reformation “battle hymn” a “Mighty Fortress”. But it's our God that is the mighty fortress. Some folks want to the church to be a fortress, a castle where we can huddle together and pull up the drawbridges and put piranhas in the moat, so we can be safe in here and keep the world out there. If we just have enough meetings and small groups and Zumba and Karate and things to do here, we never have to rub elbows with the people out there.

But “out there” is where God wants us. We come here to get recharged with the gifts of God's grace so we can take God's grace out there. The worship begins at 9am, but the service begins when you go thru those doors at the end of worship. The service begins as we carry Jesus to all the people God loves. People who live all around us, who work and study next to us. People who find themselves in other denominations, in other faiths, or in no faith at all. People who find themselves in all kinds of conditions and circumstances. People who are like us and who are very much different from us. People who are dying to know God's amazing grace.

Because that's who we are as children of the Reformation: those who know God's amazing grace, and those people who share God's amazing grace.

*There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood loose all their guilty stains. And ever since, by faith, I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply, **amazing grace** has been my theme, and shall be till I die.*