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**Reformation Sunday**

29 October 2017

**“Righteous By Faith!”**

Romans 3.28

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

This Tuesday is a red letter day! “*Yes!!! It’s Halloween – we get to dress up, go out, and beg for candy!*” Well, yes, it’s all of that. But this Tuesday – October 31, 2017 – is also the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launching of a reforming movement within the Church we call the Lutheran Reformation.

*500 years!* Quite a milestone. So, what does it mean to be a Lutheran? And what does it mean to be a Lutheran *today*??

There’s a lot of ways to approach those questions, but I find a wonderfully concise answer to those questions in our text:

**“For we hold that a person is justified by faith  
apart from works prescribed by the law”.**

St. Paul said that – what’s so “*Lutheran*” about St. Paul? Well, throughout human history – including Luther’s day and up to and including our day – the #1 most popular “religion” was and still is that we *are* made right with our gods by “works prescribed by the law”, that is, by good deeds.. Whether it was throwing a virgin into a volcano to appease the goddess who lived there, or offering a human sacrifice on a stone altar to placate the sun god, or giving money to the church to buy God’s favor, a lot of people believe that it’s our good deeds that make our god like us and save us. We may be Buddish or Baptism or Catholic ... or even *Lutheran* – for many of us there is that deep-seated notion that “good people go to heaven” and “bad people go to hell”. That just seems to “make sense”. It’s what most people believe. But as logical and appealing as that may be, it is *not* the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Church in which Luther grew up and in which Luther served as a priest was teaching that you are saved by God’s grace, but that it’s *your* task to *accumulate* enough of that grace to save you. It’s like God has scattered all these “grace eggs” all around us: at Baptism you were given a basket and now your task is to accumulate a basket full of grace eggs. Go to mass – you get a grace egg. Say the rosary – you get a grace egg. Do your assigned penance – you get a grace egg. When you die – if you have a basket full of grace eggs, you go to heaven. And if your basket is not full, you go to purgatory where through suffering you can acquire more grace eggs until your basket is full and you can then go to heaven.

That’s what Luther was taught to believe. And it tormented Luther. No matter how much he did, how much he suffered, he just didn’t believe he was accumulating enough grace. No matter what he did, he believed in God’s eyes he would still be a sinner.

And then Luther did what in his day was a radical thing – he went back to the Bible. He read passages like today’s Epistle, Romans 3: “<sup>22</sup>(We appropriate) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ! ... *All* have sinned, *all* fall short of the glory of God. *All* can now be made right

with God by the free gift of God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... **God justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.**"

Luther read Romans 1.17 where St. Paul quotes the Prophet Habakuk: "The one who is righteous through *faith* will live." That is the heartbeat of the Gospel. The word "Gospel" means "good news". What's *good* in this verse is that the righteous will *live*. What's *news* in that verse is that we can become righteous – right with God – *not* by our good works, *not* by our striving to accumulate enough grace, but that we become right with God through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Nothing else is required.

*That* is the insight that launched the Lutheran reforming movement. It wasn't a new insight, but a rediscovery of the old, old story of Jesus and his love that had been lost through the centuries.

We are made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ – nothing else is required – and those who are right with God shall live.

What does it mean to be a Lutheran? I can't say it better than St. Paul this morning: **"We hold that a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works prescribed by the law".**

What does it mean to be a Lutheran *today*? Is the answer to that question rooted in culture? Is it a language, or a style of worship, or a form of governance, or a specific hymnal that indelibly marks us as Lutheran?

Well, there are Lutherans all around the world speaking many different languages. Some of us have bishops and some presidents. Some of us have women serving as pastors. We use many different hymnals.

Lamb of God is a community of Liberian Christians who share our facility here at Ascension. When Lamb of God *Christian* Church was considering becoming Lamb of God *Lutheran* Church their biggest concern, their biggest reason for hesitating was the question "if we become Lutherans will we have to change our style of worship?" And I assured them that when they became Lutheran the way they worshiped would then *be* Lutheran.

What it means to be a Lutheran today is still rooted in Paul's observation: "We hold that a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works prescribed by the law". Keeping *that* at the *center* of our faith and life is what marks us as Lutherans.

*We* hold that we are made right with God by God's grace alone. And that we apprehend that grace by faith in Jesus Christ alone. And so we Lutherans today are wary of *anything* that sounds like a person can approach or appease God by our own effort. Or that we can curry God's favor by *our* works, *our* deeds.

Lutherans today are suspicious of "decision theology" – that to be saved *you* have to make a decision for Christ. 500 years ago Luther wrote as his explanation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Apostles Creed: "I believe that I *cannot* by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me to faith by the Gospel." We hold that we *cannot* make a decision for Christ, but that it is through the proclamation that Christ has made a decision for us that the Holy Spirit awakens saving faith in us.

Philip Yancey said it so well in his book "What's So Amazing About Grace?". He wrote, "That God is graciously disposed towards us means that there is nothing we can do to get God to love us more, and there is nothing we can do to get God to love us less."

So you won't (or at least shouldn't) hear a Lutheran preacher telling you that giving money to

the Church is like planting a seed and going to get God to give you more in return. Or that by fasting you will curry God's favor and bend His will to conform to your will, so that God will bless your project with success. Or that you have to do penance because your sins have not been paid for in full.

God has given us his Son Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. God has already given us his dearest treasure. There is nothing we can do to get God to love us more than the cross. There is nothing we can do to get God to love us less because of the cross. We believe that Jesus died once for all sins and for all sinners. We are not going to get God to "bless us more" than that. We are not going to manipulate God into giving us more things.

And it is because we believe Christ has done it all to make us right with God, that in humble response and in deepest gratitude, we want to share God's love with others. We want to share the material blessings God has given us with others. Knowing that God has taken care of our deepest need, we want to help others in all of their needs. With gracious words and in loving deeds, we want to point others to the infinite love we have found in Christ. We do it not to get God to love us more – he can't love us more than the cross. We do it not to get God to bless us more – he can't bless us more than the cross. We do it because we hold that we are made right with God by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

And we are eternally grateful!

We recently reposted a post from travel guru Rick Steves, who you may know from his PBS programs or books. Rick Steves is a Lutheran, and in this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year has posted a lot about what being a Lutheran means to him.

I especially like this one the best because it is so elegantly simple. Rick Steves writes

I am a Lutheran because it fits my personality –

Pack light but bring Jesus along.

Keep it simple; embrace life; celebrate diversity.

Jettison needless rules.

Stand up to authority when the truth needs a hand.

And dance through the blessing of life on Earth like a child in God's eyes.

*That's* what it means to be a Lutheran today!

In Jesus' name.

Amen!