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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation
Saturday, October 28th, 2017
Sunday, October 29th, 2017

Sermon: Still about Jesus

Texts: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28

Focus Statement: We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works of the Law.

Function Statement: That they would rejoice in God's free gift of grace that sets them free from sin.

Sermon Structure: Text-Application

Doctrinal Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. At this celebration of the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation, I want to talk to you about a truly remarkable man indeed. He came from humble beginnings, born in a backwater town, yet rose to become one of the most famous people the world has ever known. In fact, he changed the course of human history forever. He preached the Word of God even when put on trial before the political and religious leaders of his day. He challenged authority and stood up for the truth, even putting his life on the line for the Word he spoke. If you follow his teachings and believe

in his message, you will never go wrong. And, of course, the man about whom I speak is... *Jesus Christ!*

Wait! Did you think I was talking about someone else? Oh, you thought I was talking about Martin Luther, didn't you? Well, I suppose I could see how you'd think that way, but no, I was talking about *Jesus*. You see, the Reformation never really was about Martin Luther. It's *always* been about Jesus. And it still *is* about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh who died and rose again to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. For, as Jesus declares in our Gospel lesson, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36, ESV).¹

The Reformation is all about the freedom we have in Christ—not political freedom, although that's part of the cultural heritage of the Reformation. And not just freedom from the papal tyranny of Rome, although that's part of it too. No, the Reformation is all about *spiritual* freedom won for us by Christ on the cross. Before Christ came, we were slaves to sin. As Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). But by his death and resurrection, Jesus freed us from our slavery to sin. As St. Paul writes in Galatians 5, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1a).

Jesus broke the chains that kept us in sin when he died on the cross and rose again on the third day. St. Paul writes: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith...” (Rom. 3:23-25a).

Wow! There’s a lot of theology packed into those three verses—and a lot of funny words that we don’t ordinarily say in everyday life. For example, what do the words justification, grace, and propitiation even *mean*?

Justification is courtroom language. Imagine that you are standing in the docket on trial for your sins. God the Father is the righteous judge, sitting in glory on his heavenly throne. The prosecuting attorney is the devil, since the name Satan is also the Hebrew word for “accuser.” Satan is our accuser because he continually accuses us of our sins before God (cf. Job 1-2; Zechariah 3).

And who is your defense attorney? Why, Jesus, of course! That is why the Bible calls him our “Advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1).

So, as I said, you are on trial for your sins. The court proceedings are about to begin when Jesus says, “Father, permission to approach the bench?” And because the Father is greatly pleased in his only-begotten Son, he says, “Permission granted.”

Jesus opens up the big book with a record of all your sins and wickedness committed in this life. You start to sweat, and your pulse quickens, worried that you’re done for. Only to find out, all the pages are empty! Not a single one of your sins is recorded because they have all been erased and washed away in the blood of Jesus.

“Your Honor,” Jesus says. “Satan has no case. The prosecution has no evidence against my client because there’s nothing here!”

Then beaming with joy, God the Father pounds his gavel and declares, “Not guilty! Case closed. You are innocent and free to go!” And despite all the protests and posturing of Satan on the other side of the courtroom, there is nothing to be said for it. You are *justified*,

declared righteous, holy, and just—“not guilty”—by the verdict of the heavenly courtroom.

That’s what it means to be justified. As I tell my confirmation students, it’s (*slowly*) “**just as if I’d**” never sinned. Justified. Just as if I’d never sinned. And this gracious declaration is ours in Christ Jesus, not because of who we are or what we’ve done or haven’t done, but simply and solely because of who *Jesus* is and what he did for us on the cross.

St. Paul insists that we are “justified by his grace as a gift.” Grace means that you can’t earn it, win it, steal it, or buy it. You can only receive it as a gift “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Propitiation is another funny word—in English, in Latin, and in Greek. Propitiation means “an atoning sacrifice,” that is a sacrifice made in blood to pay for the price of reconciling two parties back into a relationship. Propitiation recalls for us all the Old Testament animal sacrifices, such as on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the people to cover their sin. But

now Christ has died once for all, the final sacrifice for sin. Remember that he is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Salvation may be a free gift, but it comes at a heavy price. It cost God the life of his only-begotten Son. And as long as we believe this and receive it by faith, we are saved.

St. Paul underscores this in verse 28, the hallmark of Lutheran theology: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Let’s unpack that. “For we hold that one is justified”—declared righteous and made right with God—“by faith”—simply by believing in Jesus Christ—“apart from works of the law”—meaning that we cannot contribute an ounce of effort to our salvation.

That is why, in Luther’s famous German translation of the New Testament, he did something that his enemies found rather unseemly. He actually added a word to this verse: the German word *allein*, or “alone.” “For we hold that one is justified by faith *alone* apart from works of the law.” Luther, of course, was not so conceited as to imagine that he could improve upon Scripture. His translation endeavored to capture the *spirit* of the Biblical text, not a word-for-word, wooden-

literal translation. He simply underscored the beautiful truth already enshrined in the Scriptures—that human beings cannot save themselves but are completely and fully dependent upon God and his grace to be saved. Because of our fallen, sinful nature, we could never do enough good or avoid enough evil to save ourselves. Therefore, we shouldn't shy away from Luther's magnificent translation. For indeed we *are* justified by grace *alone* through faith *alone* in Christ *alone*—apart from works of the law.

The Reformation emphasis on the four “solas,” Word alone, grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone, is what shapes our Lutheran theology. Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Sola Christus. (*Aside: You could also mention Han Solo, but that would be Star Wars, not Christianity!*) The four Solas flesh out what our freedom in Christ is all about. And they point us to Jesus and the cross as the only way to be saved.

500 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church (*Schlosskirche*) in Wittenberg, Germany, we joyfully hold up our Reformation theology, not as a celebration of Martin Luther,

but as a celebration of Jesus Christ and Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel. Who was Luther? According to him, nothing but a bag of worms! Luther's last words, written on a scrap of paper in his pocket, said that "we are all beggars" in the end. Luther was just one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread: Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. I believe that Luther was God's man raised up at the right time to point people to Jesus and away from their accusatory sins and supposed good works. But Luther was still just a man, an unworthy servant who did his God-given duty.

Did you know that Luther never actually wanted a Church to be named after him? Originally, it was Luther's enemies who called the Reformation movement the "Lutheran" Church. They meant it as an insult. Luther simply wanted it to be called the Evangelical Church, that is, the *Gospel* Church. Luther didn't think too highly of himself. Yet he thought everything of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation.

Nevertheless, the Lutheran name stuck, and that's what we've been called ever since: Lutherans. Maybe someday we can amend that.

The Reformation was never about Martin Luther. It has always been about Jesus. And it still is. “For we hold that one is justified by faith [alone] apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). In the name of Jesus. Amen.