

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

I want to share a couple excerpts from our second reading this morning from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. "For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law," and "since all have sinned and fall short of glory of God; they are now justified by his 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."

Martin Luther, a monk, a priest, a professor of Old Testament, suffered greatly from the torment of knowing that as good as he tried to be, as pure as he tried to live, he was still a sinner. He realized that nothing he could do could save him from damnation as a sinner. The idea of repentance in Luther's time was to do penance, but no matter how much penance he did, it was of no comfort to him.

It is hard for us nowadays to realize the impact of sin and never-ending penance on the people of Luther's time, including Luther himself. So in many respects, because most of us have grown up with it, it's equally hard for us nowadays to realize how incredibly freeing it was for Luther, and other Christians when Luther rediscovered what had been known in the early church, e.g., by Augustine, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Luther had been preparing for a series of lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans when this caught his attention in a way that transformed his life, leading to the Reformation.

There is a Greek word which when translated into Latin came across as "do penance" but actually means to have a "change of heart", a change of mind. Repentance therefore is not something we do outwardly to earn grace, instead it is something the Holy Spirit works inwardly in us, transforming us. Again, this change of heart is not something we do, earn, deserve, can earn, merit, it is not some work or works righteousness thing that is up to us to accomplish. Instead it is the work of God.

Then in the gospel of John, the last verse of our gospel this morning, we are told by Jesus, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Even if you've been in my office, you may not have noticed it, but those words are on a little plaque that hangs on the wall, just to the left of my office door, they were a gift from my wife long ago because I talked about those words so often.

So the Son of God makes us free, and he also tells us "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free!"

Free, truly free! But what does it mean to be made free? Is anything really free? Does it mean we don't have to do anything to be a good Lutheran Christian? But there are so many things we want, we want our lives to be free of burdens and

illnesses, without worries about money, watching our weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, broken bones, we want to be free from all those things.

Interestingly enough, when we really are honest with ourselves and we start to assess, to think about what we really want, we begin to see that perhaps what we want is getting in the way of what God wants for us. And that seems to be the dilemma. Because what Martin Luther realized way back when is that Jesus has set us free, but it's freedom to do God's will, not our will. God's hope is that we will begin to want what he wants, that we will want to do as God wants us to do.

Back at the beginning of the Reformation, Luther hoped that when Christians heard the good news, the gospel, that they are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, they would be freed from the burdens of indulgences for deceased loved ones, for themselves, that they would be freed from the burdens of the religious system they knew. Luther hoped that once Christians of his time knew that salvation was given them as a gift, by grace through faith, not as a reward or as something earned, that they would repent, come to services faithfully, live according to God's will, not because they had to, but because they would want to do so. Luther hoped for a change of heart, a change of mind, a true transformation in the lives of parishioners that would even transform and reform the church. The truth is however, sin and disobedience, the demands, cares and values of the world fight against the gospel.

So was Luther wrong about the Gospel? Did Luther misunderstand the freedom of the Christian? Does this mean that it's not grace, but works, that saves, and drives Christians to the cross of Christ?

Of course it doesn't mean that at all, it means only that the forces working against Jesus and his followers are powerful and more active than we can even imagine. Understand that we disciples must be clear about what it means to be saved and to be freed by the Son. Understand that being set free doesn't mean we are free to do whatever we want. Understand that being a disciple leads to discipline including worshiping God faithfully on Sunday morning, giving to support the mission of Jesus' church, understand that we are to immerse ourselves in the Word of God, God's law within us. Understand that we are free to do what we want, so long as what we want, is what God wants!

When we experience the depth of God's mercy, God's kindness in Christ, we can't help but respond accordingly; freely, thankfully, sacrificially, hearts transformed by the good news – Jesus Christ! We are overpowered by God's love, made manifest in the death of his Son on the cross for our salvation. We are overpowered by God's love with lives, hearts transformed, touched, hearts on fire.

Sometimes we struggle with lukewarm faith, we take freedom to be a license, but we are justified by God's grace even as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, to live in our Gospel-freedom, as committed disciples of Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, who has set us free, so that we will be free, indeed! AMEN

