**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Reformation Sunday (observed)**

**October 27, 2019**

**Romans 3: 19-28**

Today, Lutheran churches around the world are celebrating the Reformation. And I am sure, throughout the world, pastors are climbing into their pulpits and recalling the remarkable events of Martin Luther’s life. Events which, without worry of overstatement, we can say completely changed the course of Christianity forever.

Congregations will hear about Luther’s birth on November 10, 1483. They will hear how he was named, Martin, because he was baptized on St. Martin of Tours’ day. People will listen to the story of how Luther’s father wanted him to be a lawyer and how a fateful thunderstorm in June of 1505 frightened him so much, he cried out, *“Help me St. Anne! I will become a monk!”* Luther survived the storm and became a monk.

Much will be made of his tortured soul; his overwhelming sense of guilt because of his sin. So frightened was Luther of God’s punishment for his unworthiness that even when he said his first mass, he almost ran out of the church when it came to reciting the words of institution. Men, women and children will hear of Luther’s need for almost continual confession because of a grinding sense that he was utterly lost. The tension Luther felt between trying so hard to be holy and knowing he was not led Luther’s own confessor and spiritual guide, a man by the name of John Staupitz, to say on one occasion, *“Good lord, man. God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God.”* He urged Luther to look to the cross. But when he did, Luther only saw God’s punishment for sin. Can you imagine, that is what the cross of Jesus had become to Luther? It became a symbol of God’s wrath instead of a symbol of God’s love.

Pastor’s will speak of Luther’s life changing *“rediscovery”* of the gospel through his study of the Book of Romans. Many will learn what Luther saw so clearly from God’s word, that *“the righteous live by faith.”* Luther’s transformation will be lauded and all will hear of his great and emboldened faith in the full and free forgiveness of sins won for all men by the blood of Christ. Examples will be given, like, when Luther stood before Charles V, the heir to the 1000-year-old Holy Roman Empire, and asked to recant all he had written, Luther boldly replied, *“Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning - and my conscience is captive to the Word of God - then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me1 Amen.”* Without a doubt, Luther’s life and the Reformation are pretty remarkable.

Given all this, one would think that the Reformation was all about Luther, wouldn’t you? After all, this is the sort of stuff which comes immediately to mind when the word *“Reformation”* is even mentioned, isn’t it? But, you know, the Reformation wasn’t about Luther at all and Luther, more than anyone knew this. Do you know what Luther would do if he knew pastors were spending so much time on his life from the pulpit? He would probably blow a gasket! He would say, “*What are you doing preaching Martin Luther? Did Martin Luther go to the cross? Did Martin Luther die for you? Did Martin Luther shed his blood for you. When did Martin Luther save anyone? You preach Christ!”* That is what Luther would say . . . except maybe in German . . . because Luther, more than anyone realized what the Reformation was all about. And what was the Reformation all about? My dear friends in Christ, the Reformation was not about Luther at all . . . it was about Jesus Christ and him crucified for the sin of the world. Moreover, it was about Jesus Christ and him crucified for us; for you and for me. And that is the gift that Luther left the church and that is what we see in our text for today from Romans. Luther provided the clear answer to this all-important question: “*When it comes to our salvation, on who do we focus for our salvation? Ourselves and our efforts or on Jesus and his efforts on our behalf?”*

Luther would never have wanted the focus to be on himself. He had, as I already mentioned, lived with the focus on himself. That actually was the problem. Luther focused on himself, saw his sin and felt hopeless. Paul says in our epistle for today, “*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God*.” The Law, that is, the Ten Commandments, with its demands for perfection literally leaves you silent. And make no mistake about it, the Law does demand perfection. I know we like to say things like, *“Oh come on! No one is perfect. After all, we are only human.”* We are indeed human and indeed, none of us is perfect. However, that does not lesson the Laws demands. To enter heaven, if you wish to do this through your obedience to the Law, you have to be perfect. You are not, for the entirety of your life, permitted to stumble even once! Not even once!

And the Law doesn’t miss a trick. Think of it this way, it is like the video camera on the television program *Survivor* which analyzes and scrutinizes every aspect of your life, except, that none of your life is left out for commercial breaks. Can you imagine having your entire life recorded and presented in God’s courtroom? Worse, imagine a camera that not only records your every action but somehow could read your every thought? Do you think people would find you perfect in thought, word and deed? Do you think you would be found guilty or not guilty? I will let you answer that for yourselves.

The Law doesn’t leave any room for self-justification. If you say, “*Well, I have never committed murder.”* The Law responds, *“Really, you’ve never hated anyone or had hateful thoughts toward someone?”* That’s what Jesus says breaks the fifth commandment. You say, *“I’ve never stolen anything.”* The Law says, *“Really. You’ve never copied copyrighted material? You’ve never taken a pen or office supplies from work? You’ve never taken an extra-long lunch?”*

That amount of scrutiny and that amount of focus on himself is what led Luther to despair. That’s what the Law does. It focuses on you and every misstep you have in thought, word or deed you commit. And it is a constant reminder of your sin. If you focus on your life in a hope to see righteousness, you will only be left discouraged, because you will never measure up. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

I remember a friend of mine who graduated from the seminary about year after me. After he had been at his church for about three months he called me. He was really struggling with the sense of his own sin. “*Sometimes,”* he said, “*I look at my own sinful life and feel like such a fraud. How can I stand in the pulpit and preach to my congregation*?” I answered, “*Do you actually think that your congregation believes you don’t sin? I know mine doesn’t!”* You see, this is what happens when our focus shifts to ourselves. All he could see was sinfulness. That happens to all us when we look to ourselves and hope to see that maybe we’re not that bad.

What I told my friend was what Luther needed to see at the time of the Reformation. I said, “*You know, the Gospel is good news, not bad, and it applies to you too. You need to stop looking at your life and look at Jesus’ life. What you’ll is see that you’re forgiven too and when you step into the pulpit, that’s what you proclaim: the forgiveness of Christ, because your people are feeling the same way you do: that they’re frauds, hypocrites and sinners.”* You see, what Luther found was that God provided salvation through something outside of ourselves. God provides something completely apart and separate from us, so that we would not be burdened with relying on ourselves. Our focus is not inward, but outward and away from ourselves and toward Jesus and him crucified.

 Paul tells us in Romans that, “*a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known.”* This righteousness is not a requirement for certain behavior, it is a gift of righteousness and it is found in our Lord Jesus Christ. This gift comes to us apart from the Law, meaning it is separate from our works. The entire message of the Scriptures reveals this, testified to by the Law and the Prophets. The Bible, from cover to cover, testifies about one thing: Jesus. It’s all about him, not you and not me. And this, God in his great mercy has revealed to us.

In Jesus, we see that we are justified (that is, declared *“not guilty”)* freely by his grace. Paul so clearly tells us that God, presented his Son, Jesus as a *“sacrifice of atonement.”* Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross, was a pleasing and all sufficient sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world, including yours and mine. So perfect was his sacrifice that there is nothing we must do in order to be justified. We are justified merely by our God given faith in Jesus; knowing that he died for us. Isn’t it both amazing and tragic that the church had lost this message for centuries?

There are no sins for which Jesus did not die. To make this a bit more personal, you have committed no sin for which Jesus didn’t die. Yet, there are times when we still focus on ourselves, like my friend. And when we do it is easy to believe that somehow the love of God does not extend to me.

I know I have told this story before but it fits so perfectly with this point. A friend of mine works as a pastoral counselor with drug and alcohol abusers. Almost everyone who comes to see him feels that they cannot be forgiven for the things they have done. *“In every case,”* he said, *“I show them a picture I keep on my desk of our crucified Lord on the cross. I hand it to them and ask them, ‘Which of your sins do you think he did not pay for?’* *and then I leave them alone to think about.”* Again, in every case he said, he has returned to find them sobbing as they realize what Christ has done for them. To realize the full and free forgiveness of Christ, we must turn our eyes away from ourselves and fix our gaze upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

This Reformation Sunday, let us remember that the real focus of Reformation was entirely and completely on Christ. It was never on Luther or any of the other reformers. It was the rediscovery that God’s plan of salvation is not about us and what we must now do, but entirely and completely about Jesus and what he did. It was the coming to the understanding once again in the truth as Paul put’s it, “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the observing the law.”* This we believe. This we confess. And, to quote Luther from the Small Catechism, “*This is most certainly true.”* In Jesus’ name. Amen.