

Reformation Sunday
The Reverend John H. Brock

October 29, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46;
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

So, here it is – Reformation Sunday – and we are all gathered together. Some of us are wearing red (I have on my red socks); red is the color of celebration, the color of festivity. Why do we do this? What is there to celebrate about the reformation?

Well, to start we have to go back to the beginning, we have to go back to that little boy who was born in a backwater province of the Roman Empire about two thousand years ago. Jesus, who was killed by the religious leaders of the day, the leaders who feared for their very jobs even though Jesus came and said, “God loves you”. God loves you just the way you are; the only way to get to God is not through any of the works, not through any of the sacrifices that you’ve been doing; the only way to get to God is to go through Him. Well, He was killed for that, but He rose again, and thus began our Christian church.

At first, Christianity was illegal and believers were often hunted down and killed. In 313 A.D. Constantine came along and legalized Christianity. Constantine had a vision from God in which he was told that the symbol, the sign of *Chi Rho* (which looks like a P and an X) was a sign that he would conquer. The *Chi Rho* is really the first two letters in the Greek for the word *Christos*, or Christ. Constantine conquered in the name of Christ and legalized Christianity, which brought about some good things . . . and some bad things. One of the good things was that non-believers stopped killing Christians. One of the bad things was that Christians started killing Christians because they didn’t always agree with everything.

Over the years, the church started telling people there were certain things that had to be done in order to earn God’s love: you have to offer sacrifices, you have to give certain amounts of money; the only way you can get into God’s good graces if you make yourself worthy enough. And that is exactly what the religious leaders in Jesus’ day were telling folks.

Early Christian leaders did agree with that theology, as wacky as it is. One of them was a guy from Germany named Martin Luther. Martin Luther was born in the late 1400’s. Martin’s father, who operated cooper mines, wanted him to grow up to be a lawyer so that he could take care of him in his old age. The 401K plan of the late 1400’s was . . . your children. If your children had good jobs, you would have a more comfortable retirement.

One day in 1505 when he was about 20, Martin was walking home during a thunderstorm and found himself under a tree. I must interject here, that as theologically brilliant as Martin was, he didn’t have a lot of common sense to hide under a tree in a thunderstorm. While he was under that tree, Martin cried out to Saint Anne (the patron saint of miners – remember? his father had those copper mines) and promised that if she would protect him and keep him safe through the storm, he would become a monk. Well, he lived through the storm and, determined to make

good his promise, joined the Order of St. Augustine. Which makes sense, because Luther loved learning, and the Augustinians are lovers of truth and teaching.

Martin was not a half-hearted man; he was obsessive, and when he did something, he did it whole-heartedly. He constantly went to confession. He was constantly working to earn God's love. Martin became a teacher and his superior sent him off to Wittenberg to teach. He jumped into the scriptures, especially studying Psalms, Hebrews, Romans and Galatians.

And here's another interesting thing about Martin Luther. He tended to suffer a little bit from constipation. Now, there are certain rooms in our house (or in Luther's day out of the house) where guys tend to take their reading material. And there is a growing number of scholars who are fairly convinced that while Luther was in the "study room", reading and preparing for his class, he suddenly saw the light when he came across the verse that we heard from Romans today: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

A person is justified by faith apart from works. That means, you can't earn your way to God's love. You cannot earn your way into heaven. You can't be good enough. I can't be good enough. You are justified by faith apart from works. Martin tried! He was working his tail off trying to make himself good enough. James Kittelson, in his book *Martin Luther the Reformer*, wrote that Martin, later on when writing about this time of his life, said: "If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would indeed have been among them. I lost hold of Christ the Savior and Comforter and made of him a stock-master and hangman over my poor soul." You cannot earn salvation. That, for some, is the bad news.

What's the good news? We don't have to. It's been done for us! It's been given to us by a guy who was born in a backwater province of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago, who said the only way to get reconciled to God, the only way to get into that right relationship once again is not through the sacrifices, is not going out and helping the poor, is not feeding the hungry, although these are good things to do, but they will not earn you God's good grace. It has been given to you as a gift.

That's a little difficult for us as human beings to comprehend because we think we've got to do things! We've got to make ourselves righteous. But there is nothing I can do, nothing we can do. That's what this verse tells us. What else does it tell us? We don't have to! We don't have to do a thing because it's already been done for us. No matter how much we may want to, it won't happen, because of the "S" word – sin. Sin is always going to get in the way of my relationship with God, it's going to get in the way of my relationship with my spouse, with my relationship with my children, with my relationship with all of you, because human beings are always going to choose to sin. Even when we're trying to do good, it will end up being sin.

Sin is whatever it is that separates us from God, separates from one another; it's going to be different things for different people. We can't make ourselves good. We don't have to. Christ comes along and looks at the big gulf between us and God, and brings us together. Christ comes along and looks at our sin and covers it up . . . no, He doesn't cover it up, He eliminates it. Gets rid of it forever and brings us back into that relationship with God.

That's what Luther was trying to remind us. And that is why we celebrate this day. We celebrate this forgiveness of sin every time we get together here on a Sunday morning or a Saturday night or a Thursday night. We celebrate this elimination of sin every time we join together in the meal. We celebrate the elimination of sin and this coming together in a right relationship with God every time we pray. Every time we do God's will, God loves us, God forgives us. We are justified by faith apart from works. Or as it says in Galations, another of Luther's favorite quotes, "we have been saved by grace through faith", not through anything that I have done, not by anything that I will do, not by anything that I possibly can do . . . not by anything that you can ever do. Remember that. Hold onto that. Go out and share with others the good news of grace, the good news that we cannot earn God's love but it is given to us; it is given to us today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.