

*“A Day to Celebrate”*

Reformation Sunday  
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

October 25, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is a day to celebrate. We've had the announcement of our new senior interim pastor, Pastor Glen Ludwig, who will begin his ministry with us in January next year. This morning at 8:15, we baptized Andrew Augustin Sundara. And at this service we will be receiving Dorine Bollinger, Tammy Gross, Alyssa and Troy Dry, Kathleen Long, Joseph Parisi, and Jessica Greenawalt as new members who will be joining us in our mission and ministry. And on top of all that, we celebrate the reformation. A day to celebrate indeed!

So it is that we celebrate Martin Luther and his scholarship, which not only brought a new and deeper understanding of truth and freedom, but which also reshaped the Church. It was his dramatic and radical thought which resulted from careful reading of Paul's letter to the Romans and the gospels. The reformation he set in motion not only produced a reformed church, but it also produced a reforming church, a church that continues to deepen and widen in its understanding of the truth, revealed to it through the working of the Holy Spirit in the teaching and theology of the leaders of the church. For the faith to which we hold is not a static faith at all; it's a dynamic faith and it's constantly improving and growing . . . and dare I utter the word in Pennsylvania – changing. So it is that our mission and ministry are constantly evolving and growing and, yes, changing. This doesn't mean that we abandon our past, nor does it mean that we throw aside our traditions, but it does mean that we look back at our roots and then, realizing where we came from and what shaped us, we move boldly into the day and into the future.

Ours is a mission and ministry begun by Jesus in whom and through whom God has worked our salvation. The truth is, we are saved by grace through faith, being made right with God. Being assured of our salvation, then, is a pure gift of grace. It's free, unearned, and given unconditionally and with love, to everyone who has the boldness to receive it.

It's just like little Andrew Augustin Sundara receiving his baptism this morning. There was nothing required of him. In fact there was nothing he could do or bring (although I must admit he has very healthy lungs), but there was nothing he could do to secure or earn his baptism, and he certainly wasn't consulted by his parents whether they should bring him along or not. But there he was, to receive a gift, the assurance of his being made right with God, the assurance of his salvation, the assurance of his conquering death through Christ. And do you know what? Exactly the same thing is true for us. And therein lies our real freedom!

Jesus Christ came to reveal to us the absolute, unconditional love of God. We are God's beloved – just as we are, with all our faults, with all our flaws (even the ones we don't dare tell anyone else about), along with all our strengths, all our abilities, and all our achievements.

It wasn't just through the message Jesus proclaimed, but it was through His living presence among us, a caring presence, which led Him all the way to a cross, trusting fully in the Power of God to do what needed to be done to bring God's salvation to the world, and to us. It's just as the gospel proclaimed and you heard read this morning, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." So if the Son of man makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Do you remember the Jewish people to whom he spoke and who responded that they had never been in slavery to anyone? And then Jesus made the startling comment, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Aren't we though? But the Son has come to set us free. Over and over and over again.

Do you remember the disciples who asked how often we should forgive someone? Twice? Three times? Seven times? Do you remember Jesus' response? Seventy times seven! Infinitely, as His Father is with us, constantly forgiving. So if the Son makes you free, the gospel says, you are free indeed! That, beloved, is an awesome freedom, because you see, these days, in our culture, freedom has really come to mean "doing anything you please." But that's not freedom; there's another name for that, it's called "license." To be "free" means to be responsible for what one does. To be "free" means to be accountable for one's actions. In our case, our Christian freedom comes with responsibility and accountability to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Once we've accepted the grace and the forgiveness, there are expectations for us.

I guess it's a bit like a driver's license. I joked with the Sundaras earlier this morning, saying it would probably be another sixteen years before they had to face that. But it's like having a driver's license – once we have our license we're free to drive, whenever and wherever we please . . . as long as access to a vehicle. But how we drive is quite another matter. We're not free to drive however we please; there are laws and regulations that have to be obeyed, or we'll end up, at the least, with a warning from a police officer or at worst, we'll be involved in a fatal traffic accident.

Just so for our new members and for us, with our freedom comes an awesome responsibility. First, to actually put our faith into living practice in our homes, in our places of work, and in our communities. Second, to bear witness to what we believe when the opportune time arises. We're not asked to go out on a street corner and flourish our Bibles, we're not asked to beat our fellows over the head with our faith, but we are asked to share our faith and belief when the time is opportune for us to share it. And third, we're required to live with the same compassion and forgiveness and service that God in Christ has shown to us. We are called to be His disciples. Hence, our earnest endeavor to join the mission and ministry of this congregation living in the imitation of Christ as we make our way through the world.

It's a tall order. And the last obligation, to live as Christ lived, is the most difficult for us to fulfill. But we're not left alone in our endeavor, because our Lord comes to us in Word and Sacrament. He comes to us through those who already have received the gift of faith and who share the Good News with us. Just as Andrew Augustin Sundara's parents' faith brought him here to be baptized, through water and word, bread and wine, God comes. He comes to us. And

in His own mystical and mysterious way, dwells in us and will live through us, if we'll only allow it.

And then, beloved, all that's left for us is to live thankful lives in response to all that God in Christ has done for us. The next time before we act, the next time before we speak, let us ask ourselves quietly, in the recesses of our mind, Is what we're about to do, or what we're about to say, a sign of thankfulness to God?

You see, we're called to bear the caring and persistent presence of God's love in the world love to all whom we encounter in our daily living, to act and live in the world as channels of God's grace and instruments of His love. So welcome to our new members – Dorine and Tammy, to Alyssa and Troy, to Kathleen and Joseph and Jessica – welcome as you join us in our mission and ministry, in the love and in the name of Christ!

Now tell me, isn't that something to celebrate?

Amen.