

What it means to be Lutheran

Text: Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-24 Preached on 10-21-2007

Introduction:

Our church signs read either “St. Peter’s Lutheran Church” or “Trinity Lutheran Church.” Why do we say this is a *Lutheran* church? Or to put it another way, why are we *Lutheran*? Certainly we are not here to worship the man, Martin Luther. We are here to worship the God-Man, Jesus Christ. That’s what makes this a Christian church. But what is it that sets us apart from most other Christian churches in Wausau? Why are St. Peter’s and Trinity considered to be *Lutheran* churches?

Next week, we will be celebrating our Lutheran heritage. We call it Reformation Sunday. But why do we celebrate it? What makes the Reformation such a big deal? Even though Martin Luther himself would probably roll over in his grave if he knew that there were millions of people in the world today calling themselves “Lutherans” (after his last name), the fact remains that God used Martin Luther to do some extraordinary things for the Christian Church. Through this man God uncovered truths that had laid buried for centuries. These truths still form the foundation of our faith today. That is why we...

Theme: Treasure the Truths of the Reformation!

Part I: We are justified by Faith Alone

Part II: We have the authority to forgive sins

Part I: We are justified by Faith Alone

Justification by Faith Alone has been called the heart and core of the Reformation. It basically answers the question, “How can I get right with God?” For centuries, the Christian church (which in Luther’s day was basically the Roman Catholic Church) had provided the answer. The Catholic church taught, and still teaches today, that a person gets right with God by faith in Jesus Christ PLUS doing good works (Jesus + Good Works = Salvation). Luther had been taught from little on that in order for God to forgive him, he had to believe AND go to confession, attend mass, say the rosary, do penance, and carry out a host of other things required by the church.

As any good Catholic would, Martin Luther tried to do all these things and more. He worked harder and longer than anyone else to earn God’s favor. He did so by spending considerable time in confession and by doing all kinds of service related activities. Still, even after all this, he

did not feel any more comfortable with God. Luther was not convinced that God would ever be satisfied with all the works he was piling up for himself. And so, in an attempt to get on God's good side, Luther took the ultimate step. He became a monk. Now he could devote all his time to fasting, depriving and torturing his body, and prayer. To his surprise, Luther still had no peace with God. He still felt that God was demanding more righteousness than he could possibly give.

Application:

Finally, in his quest to earn God's favor, Luther turned to the Bible. There, while reading in the book of Romans, Luther discovered a passage that would not only change his life, but also change the lives of millions of people down through the centuries. Luther read, **"In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17)**. It was as if a light bulb had suddenly gone off above Luther's head. This was something he had never heard before. The idea that a person becomes right with God, not by what he or she does, but by Faith Alone compelled him to read on.

A few chapters later Luther came to, **"Now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:21-24)**. It was as if the gates of Heaven were opened for him. By the grace of God, Martin Luther uncovered the precious truth that we are justified, that is, declared to be right with God, not by our works, but by the perfect and fully sufficient works of Jesus Christ. Friends, do you realize that's a truth we still cling to today? You and I do not hope that God will accept us. Rather, we know that He HAS accepted us for Jesus' sake. He HAS declared us to be, "Not Guilty!" That is a truth that God restored to His church through the Reformation. It is a truth that we will treasure to our grave and into eternity.

Transition:

Yes, we, as confessional Lutheran Christians, make a big deal out of the Reformation. We do so because of the truths that came out of it. *Treasure the Truths of the Reformation!* Along with the truth that we are justified by Faith Alone, comes a second and related truth...

Part II: We have the authority to forgive sins

We all have the authority to forgive sins. To understand the importance of this truth, we need to once again put ourselves in Martin Luther's shoes. In Luther's day, the church painted God as a stern, angry judge, someone you couldn't get close to. In fact, in order to approach God, it was believed that you had to be someone special. In the Roman Catholic Church that meant you had to be a priest. Only a priest had the authority to properly interpret the Bible and to forgive sins. Why were the priests the only ones who could do these things? They were looked upon as more holy than the average person. They had taken a vow of celibacy and poverty, thereby earning them the right to do such things.

Martin Luther, however, said, "Wait a minute! Why does a vow of celibacy make a person more righteous than a person who is faithfully married? Why is the person who serves holy communion more righteous than the person who receives it?" Martin Luther now understood that it was only through faith in Jesus that God sees every one of us as holy, no matter whether we are married or unmarried; no matter whether we are clergy or laity. Peter said that by believing in Jesus Christ we are, "**A holy nation**" (1 Peter 2:9). Not only that! In the same verse Peter refers to us as a, "**Royal priesthood**" (1 Peter 2:9). In other words, every believer is a priest before God. That means that as Christians we have the right to read the Bible for ourselves to grow in our understanding and knowledge of salvation. Being a priest before God also means that we have the right to share that Good News with others. Yes, each and every Christian has the authority to forgive sins.

Application:

Do you realize what a blessing it is to be able to go directly to God: To pick up His Word and read it; to speak to Him daily in prayer? There is no need to access God through some earthly mediator like a human priest or a dead saint or a virgin (yet sinful) mother. The Bible says that, "**There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus**" (1 Timothy 2:5). Isn't it awesome to know that we have direct access to God through faith in Jesus Christ? That is what gives me both the confidence and the authority to stand before you and say, "Your sins ARE forgiven! Heaven IS yours! I don't do so because I'm more special (or holier) than you are. Rather, I am merely putting into practice a right that we all have as Christians. The reason why I do it

publicly week after week is because that's what you have called me to do. But that doesn't mean I am the only one who has the right to do it. You too have the authority to forgive sins.

Through His servant, Martin Luther, God restored to His church the long hidden truth that every Christian is a priest before God. That means that we have all the authority and all the credentials we need to go and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with every person we meet. As we do so and as souls are brought to Jesus, they will then use the Gospel to touch other people who, in turn, will reach out to even more people. This is the unity God seeks and works among us, not through the compromise of His Word of Truth, but through the bold proclamation of its Saving Message. That is a truth that God restored to His church through the Reformation. It is a truth that we will treasure to our grave and into eternity.

Conclusion:

Our custom of celebrating our Lutheran heritage is falling more and more out of favor. More and more Christians, even Lutheran Christians, want to downplay the significance of Martin Luther and the Reformation. This day and age many Christians view *doctrine* as a bad word and want to unite under the banner, "Let's agree to disagree!" Because we are sinful human beings, we too could reason that God wants Christians to put away their differences and pretend that *doctrine* doesn't matter.

But such artificial unity does not bring glory to God. Not when so much of His Word of Truth is ignored or put on the back burner. Martin Luther was a man who sought to put Scripture back at its rightful place: As the only ruling norm (or deciding factor) for the church's doctrine and practice. Some pretty amazing truths resurfaced as a result! So next week we will celebrate our Lutheran heritage! We will make a big deal out of the Reformation! Because of that historic event, we know that (1) we are justified by Faith Alone and that (2) we have the authority to forgive sins. *Treasure the Truths of the Reformation!* Amen!