

**Reformation Trapeze – Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36**  
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Happy Reformation Sunday! October 31, 1517 is the day that a professor of theology and monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses onto the door of the Chapel at Wittenburg. And with the sound of that hammer hitting that nail, a revolution began that changed the world. The revolution was one of returning to God's word, returning to a proper understanding of God's grace, and one of beginning to see God once again, as God presents Himself to us.

This had tremendous implications for the Church. Pretty obvious I guess as we are worshipping almost 500 years later in a Lutheran Church! But if you look at the Reformation, or read about it, you will see that all kinds of changes took place in the world because of Martin Luther's stand against the false leadership, and false teachings of the church in those days. People talk about the cultural change that went along with getting the Bible into the common person's hands in their own language. Sociologists talk about how much society changed when someone finally challenged the Pope and the leadership of the church. Educators praise the change in educational philosophy that went along with educating all people so they could in turn educate the members of their own households. There is so much that we can talk about!

But here, in God's house, we need to remember the main point of the Reformation. The Reformation wasn't about education, or sociology, or culture. The Reformation, in 1517, was simply about returning to the freedom given to us through the Gospel. And that is what it is still about today. Of all the 95 Theses, there is one that stands out to me like none other. Number 62 – "The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God."

I know this doesn't sound like anything profound to us here today; we talk about the Gospel and the grace of God all the time. But let's go back in time and see things through the eyes of this young monk Martin Luther for a moment. This young guy was all set to go to school to be a lawyer. His Dad worked hard to give him an opportunity he himself never had. And much to Dad's dismay, young Martin told him, I am going to go to school to be a monk. And he took to his studies with a vengeance. But this is where the problems started.

As he began to learn from his teachers, he discovered how much was lacking in his life, and how much sin he had in his life. **Read 3:20.** The Law of God was clear to Luther. The problem was that no one was teaching what the Bible actually teaches us about how to find peace and freedom in Christ. So the more Luther learned about his sin, the more he tried to fix the problem of sin on his own. He tried to make things right by his own efforts. He wouldn't just confess his sins; he would sit in the confessional for hours trying to recall every single thing that he did which fell short of God's commands. Even for the best of us, this is an impossible task. He tried to treat his body severely, to punish himself for his sins. He would beat his body, he would whip himself, he would go out and lie in the snow all night without so much as a blanket. But the more he tried to

please God with these actions, the more he would realize how foolish his attempts were, and fall deeper into despair. He eventually fell into a deep depression, and got angry at God. "How could God set up such strict rules, all the while knowing we would never be able to satisfy Him, that we would always fall short."

But he continued to study. And as he read through the Psalms, God made something click in his brain. He read Psalm 51, and started to see that there was another side to God. He started to understand that God does inflict us with standards for holiness and purity which we cannot attain on our own, but God is ALSO the answer to our sins. The first verse of Psalm 51 was especially powerful for Him: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

Luther began to rediscover the central message of the Bible. That God loves his people, that God forgives his people, and that God gives us poor miserable sinners his righteousness as our hope and security. For so much of his life, Luther tried to get to God by being good, by doing penance, by visiting holy relics, by punishing himself and none of it worked. There were still sins. There were still reasons to doubt. There were still glaring examples of how far he still needed to go. But the Gospel message changed all of this. That God would come to him. That God could give salvation, not as a prize, but as a gift. That God would actually GIVE him righteousness, give the sinner forgiveness, give the hopeless the promise of eternal life with Him. Imagine for a second, how much this changes everything.

And this change is what we celebrate in God's house this morning, and every morning for that matter. We celebrate that we have the truth, not just of the Law, and our sinfulness, and our hopelessness, and the righteous anger of a just and holy God. But we ALSO have been given the truth that GOD himself is the answer to our sinfulness, and hopelessness. That God sent his only Son to be, as Romans says, the propitiation, or substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. That GOD loves us, and destroys our sins with his Son's death, and replaces our sins and his wrath with his own Son's purity, and holiness, and his eternal unwavering love.

I love how our reading from Romans spells this out so beautifully: **Read 3:21-25a.**

THIS is the central focus of the Reformation. This is the central focus of the Word of God. This is the GOSPEL! That though we have all sinned against God, although the Law makes it clear that we deserve God's eternal punishment, God has given us his grace as a GIFT. He himself is the sacrifice for our sins. And this is a gift that we receive, not through what we do, or by what we deserve, or what we earn, but it is, as Romans says, "to be received by faith!" This faith that itself is even a gift, undeserved, from God. This is real freedom.

But the work of the Reformation continues. Because this message of freedom is so different from anything else in the world, and has power like nothing else in the world, that people have a hard time with it. Even people that met Jesus himself struggled with

the idea of God's grace given freely to them. We see it in the Gospel lesson.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him... **Read 8:31-33**. Jesus starts telling these folks about the truth of His teaching, of His grace and the Gospel and how it can free them. And immediately, they start talking about how they don't need to be free because they aren't slaves to anyone or anything. They start pointing to all kinds of other stuff that they think can save them, their heritage, and the rules they follow as Children of Abraham, their way of life, and on and on. But Jesus says to them, NOTHING apart from me, can truly give you freedom. NOTHING apart from me, can offer you forgiveness, and life, and eternity.

Jesus answered them, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”**

And the same can be said of us here today. All of us, at times, need a reformation moment. All of us at times need to return to what God says, and does, and reveals to us in His Word. Because all of us, even us Lutherans, who know all the verses to “A Mighty Fortress,” and know that Luther's wife was named Katie, and that she snuck out of the convent by hiding in an old fish barrel, and all this kind of stuff, can lose sight of what is most important about our faith.

It's easy to get lost in the details. It's easy to get lost in trying to fight Luther's battles in our own lives. It's easy to try and set ourselves free. To think of all that we might do to get back in to God's good graces, to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, and treat God like he's there when we need him, but neglecting to realize how desperately we need him. It's all too easy to try and think of ways to get God to notice us, and see us, and love us; when he's already accomplished everything for us on the Cross. The truth is that the Son has set us free indeed. He has freed us from sin by paying the dreadful price in full. He has shown us that he not only notices us, but loves us completely and wholly, by willingly shedding his blood and dying for our sins on that horribly wonderful cross. He has given us what no one else, or nothing else can. Hope, sure and certain hope rooted solidly in His redemption and resurrection.

The Reformation message is simple, really. It's not about us. It's all about Jesus. I read something lately that I thought painted a picture of the message of the Reformation so simply and beautifully. It was about Trapeze artists. So close imagine with me for a minute that you are going out on the flying trapeze to do stunts with a partner. You climb up to the top of the platform, 50 feet in the air. You grab ahold of the trapeze bar in front of you, and with a deep breath you swing out forcefully, feeling the breeze hit your face as you fly high above the earth. On the backswing you can't help but look down and remember that there is no net down below. And with another deep breath you swing forward, and as your trapeze reaches its apex you let go and you see your partner waiting for you, upside down, knees tightly clenched around his trapeze, arms outstretched.

You have only one thing left to do. But this one thing is important. If you do it you will live. If you don't, you will plummet to your death. What do you think it is? The answer is surprisingly simple. You have to let your partner grab a hold of you. But it isn't so simple. It's hard to trust someone else that much. It's hard to be at peace with your inability to help yourself. It's hard to admit that you can't save yourself, but that someone else has to do it for you. But you have to let them catch you. If you reach out and try to make the connection happen, if you try to grab them first if you try to save yourself from falling, the connection will be impossible and you will die. BUT, if they catch you, you will be fine.

Isn't that a great illustration of God's way of dealing with us? We can't save ourselves. We can't grab a hold of him. We can't trust our own abilities, or activities, or sensibilities. We have to rely on God to catch us, to save us, to hold onto us. And what we celebrate on Reformation Sunday, actually every day, is that this is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. He has caught us, and will not let go. He has forgiven us, and won't turn away. He has promised us the Kingdom of Heaven, and won't back down.

Now you have to understand that I didn't tell you all this so that you would picture Luther on a Trapeze, although some of you just did. But rather, that we can thank God for using Luther to start a Reformation of returning people to the Good News of Christ's love. We can also thank God that this reformation impacts our lives today, and is at the root of who we are, and why we exist as a church, to continue to share with people who are slaves to darkness, that the Son of God calls them to experience the same joy and freedom that Luther experienced, and that we experience as well.

So there is a lot we can say today. But the most important thing is what Christ tells us in the Gospel reading, "So if the Son set you free, you will be free indeed." And Brothers and Sisters, that is what you are. Happy Reformation Day! AMEN.