

October 30, 2022
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Romans 3:19-28

Grace Alone

By the grace of God, we are saved. We are saved from death, from despair, from eternal emptiness. By the grace of God, and by that grace alone, we are rescued and redeemed and wrapped up in love. It's not because of our own grace that we are saved. It's not by OUR efforts or our money or our good works. We are saved by God's good work. By the mercy of Jesus. By the hope of the Spirit, we are saved.

Today is Reformation Sunday, and this was the message of Martin Luther when he nailed 95 arguments to the door of a church in Germany in 1517. Included in that list was everything he believed was wrong with the church. Every way the church had turned away from God and from the good news of Jesus. How the church had put up barriers to God's love instead of pulling them down. Martin Luther insisted that no one controlled God's mercy and forgiveness but God. You didn't need to jump through church hoops. You didn't need to confess to a priest. You didn't have to do penance. Or buy indulgences. Or get any kind of receipt from the church to prove that you qualified for eternal life. God

had already done that. Through Jesus and his death on the cross and the gift of his grace, we are saved.

Martin Luther was speaking out against a church that controlled everything. In the early 1500s, there was only one church, the Catholic church, and it was very powerful and wealthy. The leader of the church, the pope, was one of the most powerful people around. He could boss around kings and queens. And he had the sole authority to give God's thumbs up or God's thumbs down. He could let you into heaven or kick you out. If you were excommunicated by him or by the bishops or priests, then you were in big trouble eternally.

The church was in charge of God. They were the only one who could authorize your wedding, or give your children God's blessing, or bury you in sanctified ground. Without the church's say-so, you had no place in heaven and no access to God. The church made the rules for grace and forgiveness. And they weren't applied fairly. Large donations could get you God's forgiveness. Making a big gift for the new cathedral in Rome, would erase your sins, no matter how big or bad they were. You could do all the bad thing you wanted and then pay it off later. Martin Luther

struggled with this system. He struggled with the hypocrisy and the corruption it let to. He hated the way that it left people terrified, wondering if they were really saved or not? Did God really forgive them? Had they done enough to get to heaven? Could they ever really do enough?

Martin Luther knew that the church was there to give people hope, not fear. It was supposed to set people free, not keep them in a man-made prison. He knew that Jesus had taken the sins of the world to the cross.

And now, the world was free from condemnation. Free from hell. Free from the devil. Free from having to prove itself over and over again.

God had saved us. God alone. And those who trusted Jesus, who put their faith in Jesus, were free from having to do enough and be enough.

Martin Luther argued that we can't save ourselves. We can't make enough offerings or say enough right words. We must have faith that by God's grace alone, we are saved.

Martin Luther struggled with anxiety and fear himself when he was young. He worried about the devil. He worried about hell. He worried that he wasn't doing enough to avoid it. He joined a monastery and

adopted the life of a monk; against his father's wishes, who wanted him to be a lawyer. So Luther studied law and philosophy. And he became a well-known teacher and scholar. But he stayed in the church. He felt most at home there. That's where he found moments of peace from his constant worry about the devil and eternal fire.

Luther prayed and studied a lot to help him with his fear. He went to the Bible which was a true Word from God for him. Here was the original authority. Here was the basis for all the teachings and traditions of the church. Here was Jesus' teaching. Here was the first interpreter of faith, the apostle Paul. Luther was reading Paul's letter to the Romans one day. And when he read that no one will be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed by the law, he had a flash of insight. Our deeds don't earn us God's grace. Our efforts don't make us right with God. It is God who makes us right. We don't buy our access to God or exchange anything for it. It comes to us freely. Through Jesus and his faithfulness. Through the cross and resurrection. What Jesus did was enough. Otherwise why do we need Jesus at all?

Luther realized that all of this grace was a gift. It couldn't be bought or traded. It was freely given, and you accepted it by faith. Luther knew that the church needed to remember this. That's our first lesson from Luther and the Reformation today. The gift of eternal life is a gift. And knowing that sets us free. It changes our relationship with God. As the prophet Jeremiah says, it writes God's love on our hearts. It's not about laws and rules anymore. What is right and good is part of us. God's spirit of forgiveness, love, and mercy, God's vision of a new creation. That promise becomes part of us.

Martin Luther called out the church for forgetting the promise. For becoming too worldly. And emphasizing law more than grace. And wanting to maintain control. And for using people's fear to enrich themselves. Enslaving people, instead of setting them free. Martin Luther criticized the church for this, and it was a dangerous thing to do. That's the second lesson about Luther and the Reformation today.

Martin Luther was taking a risk to criticize those in power and he knew it. Just 100 years earlier, a priest named Jan Huss was burned at the stake because he criticized the abuses and corruption of the church. They

told Huss to be quiet, but he wouldn't, and neither would Luther. Both stood before church councils and both refused to take back what they had said. Luther told the church court in 1521, "I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe." He held firm to his belief that grace alone was enough, even if it meant losing his life.

There is risk involved with faith like that. There is risk in speaking truth to powerful people and telling a powerful church to give up its privilege. Even today. In a culture that promotes popularity as a sign of success. And money is what gives us faith in the future and proves our righteousness to the world. In a time when people are saying Christianity should be the law of the land and the church should have power over others as it did before; we are challenged by Martin Luther's words. We are challenged by the words of all the reformers who said that God's kingdom is not of this world. And we are made righteous by a power not our own. By the love of of a savior. And the grace of the Spirit. By the gift of God's promise to be our God. By God's choice to save us and redeem us and bless us, so we may be a blessing to the world.

Martin Luther called the church to remember what it was about. He wasn't trying to start a new church or another kind of Christianity. But over time, that's what happened. Luther and the Catholic church diverged, and we ended up with Catholic and Protestant churches. And for centuries there was a terrible division between them. Both sides condemning each other, and blaming each other, and sending one another to hell. Both claiming to be the one and only, true church of Christ. Luther did his share of name-calling. He called the pope Satan and his opponents devils. He used the new and old covenant metaphors of the Bible to demonize other Christians and to vilify Jewish people. Some of Luther's own words were used later by German Nazis in the 20th century to justify putting Jews into ghettos and concentration camps and then killing them and dumping them in mass graves. Martin Luther said that the new promises of God would replace the old ones. The words of the Bible and of the prophet Isaiah were twisted into a threat. God's promises to the Jews would be replaced by promises to Protestants.

But a new promise does not break an old promise. That's the third lesson for today from the Reformation today. God doesn't leave people behind. God does not give out awards for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, with salvation going to the most superior. Martin Luther reminded the church that God's promise is the same yesterday as it is today, but it is being made new every day. It is made new in every time and place. Adapting, evolving, changing for every context. Always expanding, always growing.

Because God is a living God with a living grace. And we are a living people. And God's promises are never broken. God will not leave us or forsake us. God won't cut us off because God found someone better. We believe God's steadfast love for us endures forever.

God's grace is a gift. It is not a purchase. It is not a possession. It is freely given and freely received. And it doesn't change. What changes is our ability to recognize it. What changes is our ability to appreciate it.

God's salvation is like a pair of glasses that lets us to look at things in a new way. God's salvation is a new heart within us with mercy and hope worked into the DNA of every cell. It isn't just a promise for the future.

It's a reality for here and now. In every place and space. The life and

death and resurrection of Jesus is a gift. Always holding us, always saving us. Always forming and reforming us for God's purposes.

It is by grace alone that we are here. By faith alone. By hope alone. By God's promise alone. We have been saved by grace. By a love that redeems our past, present and future. And we can risk anything because of it. Because it is the truth that sets us free. May God's grace give us the courage and strength to trust what God has already done to redeem us all.