

Reformation Sunday / 60th Anniversary Oct. 25, 2015

Text – Is. 55:10-11; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

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

Pilgrim Lutheran Church began sixty years ago, and that first morning service was on Reformation Sunday, 1955, but founding Pastor Ted Moeller had opted to celebrate that morning with scripture texts appointed for the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity.

He did so because that afternoon there would be a community-wide Reformation service and folks would hear the texts appointed for that occasion then, maybe even the very same ones we have heard today.

But I have a suspicion that Pastor Moeller may have made a connection at that morning first Pilgrim service to our rich Lutheran and Reformation heritage. I say that because he chose to preach that morning on the Old Testament text for that day, just two verses from Isaiah, chapter 55. Hear that passage now:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not remain there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, (Is. 55:10)

“so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11).

I can imagine that Pastor Moeller in his sermon made a connection between “the word of the Lord” in the Isaiah passage with the reference to “the word” in the beginning of today’s Gospel.

As we heard, Jesus says there, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32).

Perhaps Pastor Moeller made reference to the Reformation summary phrase, “Grace alone; faith alone; word alone” or to its Latin equivalent, “Sola gratia; sola fide; sola scriptura,” meaning essentially the same.

But before I say more, I must admit to a great deal of speculation here: the truth is, I don’t really know exactly what Pastor Moeller said in that first sermon.

On the other hand, though, I do know with full confidence and assurance that Martin Luther praised the word of God as a dynamic instrument of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the Reformation.

And Luther actually downplayed his own efforts and initiative in that regard, saying, “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing, the Word did everything.” Word alone!

In the sixteenth century medieval church of Luther's day, it was common to believe there are three sources of authority in matters of faith: 1) the church fathers; 2) the pope; and 3) Scripture.

But even as a seminarian, Martin Luther began to distrust the early church fathers as a reliable source of authority, for, as he studied their writings, Luther saw how they so often contradicted themselves.

And as a teacher of the church and a Doctor of Theology, Luther began to dismiss even the pope as a reliable source of authority. The Holy Father may be the bishop of Rome and the heir of Saint Peter, but he is still a human being. And human beings can err. Luther came to believe that even the pope is fallible and subject to error and sin – word alone.

Word alone, and faith alone – many of us have engaged in good works during these previous “60 Days of Service” leading up to this Pilgrim 60th Anniversary and our festive Reformation celebration today.

These good works we have done have been good for those who have been served, and we've likely felt good about ourselves doing them – and that's good. But our good works do not justify us before God – salvation comes instead through faith alone, as our Second Reading today reminds us.

Our good works are not the rungs of a ladder by which we climb into the heavenly realm. Our good works are not even the stepping stones by which we make our way through the swamp of sin, temptation, and evil.

Our good works may be signs of our genuine love for our neighbors, and they may be heartfelt and earnest expressions of our trusting faith in Jesus Christ – but they may also be nothing more than our attempt to increase our own self-esteem, or even our vain attempt to earn the respect and admiration of those around us.

Faith alone: keep doing those good works, for they are indeed good for those who benefit from them; and it's not at all wrong for you to feel good for doing them – but know – by all means please know – that your eternal salvation comes from faith and from your trusting relationship with your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Word alone; faith alone; grace alone – clearly the best good news in all of this is that we have a loving, gracious, and merciful God, and this is seen best in Jesus and in his death for us on the cross!

As sinners, what we truly deserve is the harshest judgment and even total abandonment from an angry and vengeful God, but that's not the nature of God, and that's not at all God's plan for us!

Sinners we assuredly are. Fortunately, though, we have a gracious God who is steadfast and forgiving.

And we have a Lord and Savior who stands by us and redeems us from all our wayward and fallen ways. And we have a Holy Spirit that comforts, strengthens, and transforms us.

And as much as we would love to be able to say that we will walk the straight and narrow path and avoid every temptation and sin, we don't say that. We don't say that because we know that there will be times when we will fail, when sin will overpower us.

But because I know that I will wander and that I will lose my way; how glad I am to know that God loves me enough to pursue me and find me; God loves me enough to bring me home and never give up on me.

Word alone; faith alone; grace alone – it all began for me, as it did for Martin Luther , in the waters of baptism, when Christ washed me clean and wrapped me up in his arms and God said, “You are my beloved child, and I will pursue you wherever you go, and I will never let you go.”

And that is reason enough and grace enough for me.
Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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