

October 27, 2019
Reformation Sunday, Virginia Synod

Today we remember how Martin Luther nailed 95 statements to a church door 502 years ago. Back in those days, this was the routine way to start an academic debate.

But one thing led to another. This act got caught up in church politics, money raising, rivalries between Germans and Italians, personality conflicts, and the invention of the printing press.

Luther hoped to renew the church, not divide it. In fact, Luther never did leave the Roman Catholic Church. He was kicked out.

Today, we and Rome are surprisingly close about almost all of the old issues of 500 years ago, except authority. New issues are the biggest problems now.

So in 2019, what's the Lutheran thing that we particularly emphasize? I answer with four traditional slogans that all fit together. Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone. The "alone" is a really big deal.

With this in mind, let's turn to today's Gospel lesson. In this lesson, the Jews who believed in Jesus did not "get it" that they were sinners. So Jesus bluntly told them that they really were sinners and that only the Son could free them. That's the "Christ alone" part.

People who like us may think that we really are fairly good people, and we may modestly agree with them. But God knows that "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." When we're really honest with ourselves, we know that too.

We can be saved only by Christ, not Christ plus our decisions, not plus our good deeds, not plus any of the other flawed things that we sinners do. What Christ alone does is good enough to save us.

Christ saves us by “grace alone,” as a gift that we do not deserve. Christ channels this grace to us in many ways, but especially through his Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion. Christ himself is fully present in these events. These are gifts from our Triune God, not good works that we do.

This is why we baptize infants. Just as with the love of a human parent, our God’s grace includes children of all ages. We confirm baptism, but we do not repeat it, because God gets it right the first time.

We believe that the body and blood of Christ really are present through bread and wine in Holy Communion. This is true, whether we believe it or not, for our Lord’s act of grace is what makes it true. Our faith trusts in what our Triune God does.

This brings us to salvation through “faith alone,” faith in Christ. Our faith receives what divine grace does. It trusts that God really does love us, even in spite of any appearances to the contrary. Faith lives by the conviction that God is greater than the forces of evil and death that afflict us for now.

The Holy Spirit inspires our faith, so that our faith is a gift from God and not our own achievement. This faith lives by the hope that all of God’s promises shall come true, sooner or later, one way or another.

By its very nature, faith in Christ inspires works of love for God and for other people, because the God who loves us also loves them, whether we happen to like them or not. Faith alone always leads us to love and never stays alone.

Christ himself is the Word of God, and Christ speaks to us through the Scriptures. So we value the authority of God's Word over our own religious experiences and thoughts. As important as our experiences and thoughts may be, we're still flawed people who may misunderstand what's happening. So we always are to stand under God's Word, not over it. We always are to seek the guidance of fellow believers.

Over the centuries, Lutherans declared that God's Word has greater authority than church leaders and tradition. We may argue about how to interpret Scripture. But in principle, Scripture has the last word. This is the "Scripture alone" part.

This is a brief summary: Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone. Many non-Lutherans also believe these things, more or less, as our Lord continues to bring greater unity to his church.

In all fairness, we Lutherans sometimes take these good ideas in wrong directions. For example, as we base our faith on God's Word more than on personal experiences and thoughts, we often fail to talk at all about the God whom we experience through Word and Sacrament. We can brag about our sports teams or our children far more than we witness to our Savior. That's not what our faith tells us to do, but how often do we still do it?

As we emphasize grace and forgiveness more than rules and regulations, we can act as though anything goes, as though there are no rules that really matter, and as though real repentance is optional. We can fall into believing in what one of our best theologians called "cheap grace." Cheap grace justifies the sin rather than justifies the sinner who repents. Again, that's not what our faith tells us to do, but how often do we still do it?

Some of us don't get involved in social issues at all, as though the Gospel has nothing to say about public life. Others emphasize social issues so much that the Gospel of salvation is eclipsed by a political agenda. Again, neither extreme is what our faith tells us to do, but how often do we still do it?

As Luther well knew, the church and Christians always need reformation and repentance. That includes the ELCA and us.

Much more can be said on Reformation Sunday, but I chose to close now with one of my favorite quotes from Luther, a quote that sums up the Christian life very well.

"This life, therefore,

Is not righteousness but growth in righteousness

Not health but healing

Not being but becoming,

Not rest, but exercise.

"We are not yet what we shall be,

But we are growing toward it.

"The process is not yet finished,

But it is going on,

"This is not the end,

But it is the road.

"All does not yet gleam in glory,

But all is being purified."

Amen