

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Reformation Sunday, November 3, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 4, 260:1, 262, 442:1-2, 263, 39.

Lessons: Jeremiah 18:1-11, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 13:21-37.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:8-9.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Earlier in our worship service, we sang:

“O Lord, look down from heaven, behold And let Thy pity waken: How few are we within Thy Fold, Thy saints by men forsaken! True faith seems quenched on every hand, Men suffer not Thy Word to stand; Dark times have us o'ertaken.” (The Lutheran Hymnal 260:1)

This was written by Martin Luther in 1523, but could certainly apply to 2019, when true faith in Jesus Christ seems almost extinguished in the world.

But before this worship service is over we will sing

“O little flock, fear not the Foe Who madly seeks your overthrow; Dread not his rage and power. What though your courage sometimes faints, His seeming triumph o'er God's saints Lasts but a little hour.”

“As true as God's own Word is true. Not earth nor hell with all their crew Against us shall prevail. A jest and byword are they grown; God is with us, we are His own; Our victory cannot fail.” (The Lutheran Hymnal 263:1 & 3)

We can sing that with confidence because

“A mighty Fortress is our God, A trusty Shield and Weapon; He helps us free from every need That hath us now o'ertaken. The old evil Foe Now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight; On Earth is not his equal.

“With might of ours can naught be done, Soon were our loss effected; But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is. Of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.” (The Lutheran Hymnal 262:1-2)

We came together today to celebrate a church holiday, a festival which is not named in the Bible. Why? Because this is a day we celebrate a revelation of the truth of God through a reformation. Today we remember

THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

- 1. Indulgences were one cause of this reformation.**
- 2. Scripture teaching was the heart of this reformation, and**
- 3. There is need for reformation today.**

On October 31, 1517, Five hundred and two years ago, a teacher of theology in Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther, wanted to debate indulgences. At that time, there was only one church in Germany, what we know as the Roman Catholic Church, headed up by the Pope in Rome. In order to build a magnificent church in Rome, known today by the name of St. Peter's, money had to be raised. One way the church had at that time to raise money was selling indulgences.

Although many confusing definitions of indulgences exist, an accurate definition of an indulgence is “a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins. It may reduce the temporal punishment for sin after death ... in the state or process of purification called Purgatory.” “The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes an indulgence as “a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian ...gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which ... dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and all of the saints.”

In 1517 indulgences were pieces of paper purchased which in effect told you your sins were forgiven. Although the Catholic Church has admitted abuses have existed at certain times in history, indulgences are still granted, even for such things as saying the rosary, a set of prayers repeated as one fingers a necklace of beads.

Our sermon text from the Bible completely rejects the idea of indulgences. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

How do you get to heaven? Not by doing the best you can and hoping God will reward you. Not by doing good works or good deeds.

How do you get to heaven? Not by being sorry for your sins, as the Catholic Church teaches as “Penance” in connection with indulgences.

How do you get to heaven? Not by suffering in a fictitious place called Purgatory, a time and place after death to which believers supposedly go before going to heaven.

You get to heaven through faith in Jesus Christ, believing that he paid the price for all sins after he lived a perfect life of obedience to God. We get to heaven by the grace of God in Christ. We use the Scriptural definition of grace which tells us that grace is God’s undeserved love and mercy.

We are sinners. As much as we may not want to recognize and admit that, we must. The Law of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments shows that fact, that truth. Just as you all have learned or are learning the Ten Commandments together with an explanation “What does this mean?” drawn from the Word of God, the Bible, by Martin Luther, we learn that we – every single human being – have sinned before God in deeds or actions, in words, and even in our thoughts. We read in the book of Genesis: ***“for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.”*** Genesis 8:21 (KJV) We read in the book of Romans: ***“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Romans 3:23 (NIV) And, of course, God demands repeatedly: ***“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”*** Matthew 5:48 (KJV)

But we just can’t be perfect and sinless. Just look at the commandments in the same way you look in the mirror to see yourself as you really are. And for all those sins you deserve eternal damnation in hell.

But there is hope. You don’t have to buy indulgences. You don’t have to prove yourself as a good person before God before he offers and gives you the gift of heaven.

God in his holy Word tells us, yes, that ***“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 3:23-24 (NIV)

This happened because ***“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** The fact that you are justified means that you are declared “not guilty” by a loving judge. You don’t have to endure the punishment of hell even though you know and the judge knew that you are guilty. The judge himself has taken care of that punishment.

That message of justification was recorded for our learning even in the lifetime of Moses, who wrote the first five books of the Bible by the inspiration of God. The apostle John wrote: ***“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”*** John 3:14-18 (KJV)

We mentioned earlier that Martin Luther set in motion a reforming of the visible church. The church did not want to be reformed and as a result many left the Roman Catholic Church and were called “Protestants” – from the word “protest” because they protested the teachings of the Catholic Church.

We’ve been careful in our churches and our teaching and preaching not to glorify Martin Luther the man. But we can speak of Martin Luther the servant of God.

To many in the world, and especially in our country, October 31 has come to be called Halloween. It has become a day – or rather a night – of the devil, or more correctly, the evening of the devil. The meaning of October 31 should really be a celebration of the day marked as the beginning of a restoration of the Word of God to and for the world. I don’t need to tell you how Satan has been celebrated on October 31. The day – or the night – has been identified as “all saints eve”, also called “all hallows eve”, the day before what the Catholic Church has called “All Saints Day”. But all saints eve has been corrupted and perverted to celebrate anything except remembering believers who have gone into heaven because of the merits of Jesus Christ.

In our world today there are some preachers who speak of the need for a “revival”.

Historians speak of the “Protestant Reformation” and the “Lutheran Reformation”. That began when Luther proposed his debate by nailing 95 statements or theses onto a church door – sort of a bulletin board for scholars, because he wrote it in Latin, which was not the language of the people but of scholars.

When we look at the evil in the world, and even in the so-called Christian church today, we realize that another reformation is needed. Even a majority of churches which use the name “Lutheran” do not teach and preach the whole

truth of the Word of God. We might even say that a different kind of “indulgences” is being taught. Leaders in many churches that go by the name “Christian” teach and preach opinions about how to make society better, how to get rid of injustice, racism, and other evils plaguing our world. They seek to make people better, and sign their names to letters trying to remove social ills and inequalities. Such leaders and such churches by their confession – or we might even say by their lack of confession – are concerned first of all about life in this world and do not prepare people for eternity. They do not teach that **“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”** For many, “salvation” is not salvation from sin, from eternal death in hell, but salvation from some kinds of worldly problems of this earth.

Many are saying that a reformation is necessary. Well, a reformation or a revival is necessary. But not the kind of reformation or revival that many want.

There must be a reformation or a revival that touches human hearts. First there must be a recognition and acknowledgement of sin. Then there must be recognition and faith in what Jesus Christ, the very Son of God did to save mankind. And there must be recognition and faith that this salvation is the gift of God and not something we can earn or do earn by being “good”.

I’ve used the word reformation repeatedly in this sermon and have now introduced the word “revival”. Some preachers speak of the need for a ‘national reformation’ or ‘revival’. The terms revival or religious revival or Christian revival are used for increased spiritual interest or renewal in the life of society or of a church which may affect many who previously had very little to do with church. ‘Revival meetings’ are a series of Christian religious services held either to inspire members of a local church or a church body to become more active or to gain new converts. Such revivals are seen as the restoration of the church itself to a vital and fervent relationship with God after a period of moral decline. Mass “conversions” of non-believers are viewed by church leaders as having positive moral effects. Such revivalism may have long term results in a visible church or may only be short-term fervor.

Revivals in the last several centuries may have stirred up great enthusiasm but may also have been lacking in real substance.

If a Gospel Revival is to have real lasting results – results that last into eternity, it must be centered in Jesus Christ and the Word of God, just as the Lutheran Reformation was. If Jesus and his perfect life are not the central message, there can be no revival.

What are the desired results of a real revival? Eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

How can a real revival take place? It must begin in the human heart and be created and inspired and guided by the Word of God. Human enthusiasm is really nice, but unless enthusiasm from a revival meeting is Christ-centered and founded on Christ and trusting only in his merits, his good deeds, it is worthless.

What each of us needs is a daily reformation of the heart, a daily revival in our hearts which trusts only in Jesus Christ and is fed only by the Word of God. We must beat down our sinful flesh and look only to Jesus for salvation.

We must remember that **“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”** We can’t take any credit for this gift from God. Scripture is clear: **“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”** Titus 3:5-7 (NIV)

Yes, there is need for a reformation today. Yes, a national religious reformation, or a world-wide religious reformation teaching only Jesus would be marvelous! But most importantly, there is a need for a reformation in your heart each day. It must begin with the Word of God working in you. There is need in your heart for such a reformation each day. And so it is no casual fluke that after our sermons we sing **“Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with Thy free spirit.”** Psalm 51:10-12, (KJV)

The Lutheran Reformation starting October 31, 1517 has had world-wide effect. But it is because of the Word of God, not because of any human effort or works. God used Martin Luther for the beginning of that reformation and he used many others to continue that reformation. And today we pray that God use us to continue that reformation, that first of all we may not be lost but saved eternally, and that through us others – many others – may come to know the only way to heaven.

God grant this, our prayer! Amen.