

## Reformation

Romans 3:19-28 & John 8:31-36

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

The other day I was looking up a phone number of another church and so I went to the Hanover Phone Book. Did you know that in the yellow pages they have over 25 denominations of churches represented in Hanover, not to mention a couple of independent churches. Of course that is not the number of churches – just the denominations. There is Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, U.C.C. Roman Catholic, Church of God, United Methodists, Episcopal, Brethren, 4square, Lutheran and so many others. So what makes us unique?

Why are you a member of this church, a Lutheran congregation? Obviously there are a lot of churches out there to attend. Several dozen right here in Hanover alone – so what makes being a Lutheran so special? Some of us come because this is where we have always gone. It is what we are familiar with, grown accustomed to, married into, or just simply felt we fitted in. But still why Lutheran?

Since 1990 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has been signing common agreements of full communion and ministry with many main line denominations including the Episcopal church, Reformed, U.C.C., Presbyterian U.S.A., United Methodists, and Moravians. In those agreements we agree to work together in ministry and can share communion and even the call of a pastor if so desired. So more and more denominations are working together for the common mission of the church. But in a town where we have over 25 denominations and even more congregations – what does it mean to be a Lutheran?

Lutherans are unique because of our doctrine and understanding of scripture. Our Lutheran heritage teaches us to think a certain way about God and about Christ and salvation. When it all comes down to it many churches and for that matter many organizations of any kind can be friendly, have fun activities, can have entertaining music be it traditional or modern, folksy or rhythmic, many such groups can even be outreaching and social minded. All of those things can describe Aroogalas Sports Bar on Eisenhower. They have fun, are friendly, have entertaining music, and advertise to outreach and even donate towards community activities. But they are not a people of Faith. What makes a Lutheran congregation special is that we are a people of the Word of God, based on this we have our doctrine in the unaltered Augsburg Confession. Being a Lutheran is being grounded in certain doctrines and foundations.

Okay I can see it in your eyes, I am losing you. As soon as I said Doctrines and foundations, some of you facially clicked off. You don't think I see it but I do. By your faces, I can

tell that doctrines are boring. Doctrines are dull. You think to yourself, “okay here pastor goes again into something so far away from my time that I don’t have to listen anymore.”

Denominational doctrines are not that important as are caring for one’s neighbor, deepening the faith, and growing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have even heard it said in church by a church member, “that as long as a person lives a good life it doesn’t matter what they believe.” So obviously with that kind of thinking we don’t need doctrine, we might as well pick and choose whatever you like and believe whatever you want – Hey what makes you feel good is good enough for me. God is about love, doesn’t matter what you think or believe as doctrine.

Or does it? Doctrine is what gives us strength, it is our backbone of faith. You have all seen a jelly fish, they have no backbone they just float wherever the tide takes them. Christians can be too much like that also, no backbones, ending up being blobs of spirituality with no backbone, just floating along in the waters of life. Christians, Congregations, entire Denominations for that matter today can become jellyfish, floating this way or that with wherever the tide takes them. But if you have no backbone where do you get? If you have no set of core values, doctrines, then who are you? If you don’t have a strong foundation then how committed can you really be?

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day set apart in our church year to remember the reformers that challenged the church to rediscover its backbone. There was passion inside of them for Biblical doctrines, for the truth of the Christian faith. They asked the questions, “What are the essential truths of the Bible, the foundational doctrines that provide for the backbone of our Christian faith?” For too long people would go to worship, and not know the Bible, the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or even most of worship. They just went because that is what you did. They went out of obedience to the state, to the controlling powers of the day. But Luther and the other reformers said they should come to worship with their minds and their hearts. To learn, to grow in faith, to deepen their relationship with God and know the Gospel truth that gives them the strength to be Christ’s disciples and witnesses of any day.

IN 1517 Martin Luther a university priest and teacher in Wittenberg, Germany nailed 95 theses or points of debate to the bulletin board doors of the chapel, knowing that the very next day was All Saints the biggest holiday in the church in those times. He challenged people to think about their faith, think about what they believe, what they know about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He challenged them to learn more, to not just willingly give in to whatever the tides of the church so called experts would take you but to get a backbone and swim against the tides to the Truth of life, to God, and his grace.

So Luther began a reformation that continues on to this day. A reforming of the church that constantly calls into question our workings, our rules, our mission, our lives, and our obedience to God as his servants of this church. Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday and recall three of

the parts of the Lutheran backbone, the doctrine of the Lutheran Church that makes who we are: The Word Alone, Christ Alone, Grace Alone,

**1. Word alone.** The Bible is our core belief, the Word of God is the center and truth of all that we know and see. In Luther's Day people didn't possess Bibles they were rarely seen. What the people heard was whatever the priest read to them from the pulpit and whatever the priest decided they needed to hear was what they heard. Most times the people heard that they were sinners and that God hated sinners and they better do better to save themselves from God's wrath, and many times that involved money payments or gifts of other kinds. In addition to that limited knowledge of the Bible the people were controlled by edicts from the Higher Church Authorities, who as the people were told were closer to God than they themselves and so knew what was best for them. This obedience to church councils and assemblies had been going on for centuries until so many rules and mandates and edicts existed that no one even knew the truth anymore. What Luther discovered in that upper room in the black cloister of Wittenberg, was not something new, what he discovered was the original texts of the Holy Scriptures. He cut through the councils and edicts of centuries of man made laws and traditions and rediscovered the love of Christ, the grace that Paul talks about in our Second reading, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Those words were not something new in the 1500's, its just that they had been forgotten because people were not grounded in the Word of God anymore, but in councils and assemblies and traditions that turned people away from God's Word. What the Reformation did and still calls us to do is to turn to the Word of God before any other source, writing or assembly, to learn the truth of God.

By reading the Word of God we also come to the second mantra of the Reforming Churches, **Christ alone**, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John 1:1. What John is writing about at the very beginning of his Gospel is Jesus, Jesus is the Word, he was there before creation, and was with God and is God. All things came into being when the Spirit of God, went out from God and spoke the Word and it was created. Right there at the beginning was the Trinity. And some Churches highlight the Father the creator, and some concern much of their time with the Spirit, but in the Lutheran Church we are a Christo-centric church, a Christ centered church. We celebrate the redemptive action of Jesus Christ, who gives us his body and blood so that we might have life. How do we know the Father and the Spirit; but through Jesus Christ. How can we come to the Father but through Jesus Christ. How can we be filled with the Spirit of God in Baptism unless Christ commands it. Lutherans

center our faith and our hope on Jesus Christ, because without him we would not be free, we would not be saved, we would not know of God's grace.

And that leads us to the third mantra of the Lutheran Church: **Grace alone**. Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, we know that our God is gracious. A God who loves us so much he gives us this gift of forgiveness even though we are sinners and do not do always what we ought to do, he still loves us, he offers us his Grace. Despite what the churches 500 years ago were teaching we can not earn God's love, you can't pay enough, or do enough, or check off enough good deeds. Just because you're a good person doesn't mean your getting to heaven. What gets you to heaven is the gift of Jesus Christ who died on a cross for you because God loved you so much he let his own son take your punishment that you deserve to have for you're your sins. Christ steps into that place of punishment instead of us and gives us a freedom that we could never earn on our own. That is Grace, that is God's love. The people of Jesus' day didn't get this in our Gospel reading, they didn't understand that they were a slave to sin, but they were and we are even today. But thanks to the Grace of Jesus who gives us his Son who sets us free and we can then be free indeed.

A Lutheran believes that we are justified, made right with God by Grace through Faith. By the grace of Jesus Christ alone, we are made right with God, this is what we believe and have faith in before everything else. Word Alone, Christ Alone, Grace Alone. That is our backbone. That is what gives us strength and establishes us a congregation. It is what we answer when asked why are we Lutheran, why we come here, what is it we believe. It is not because of others, it is not because of tradition, it is not because of the latest fads or society groups, it is because we are God's children his disciples set free by his love for us. We know this how? By The Word Alone, through Christ Alone, in his Grace Alone. May you strengthen your backbone of faith this day, and remember what it means to be a Lutheran, a Christian, a disciple of Christ. May you be that disciple of Christ and hold to his teaching and know the truth so that the Son can set you free, free to be a strong, backboned, witness in all that you do.

May the Peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.