

Goal: That the hearers more assuredly trust in the cross of Jesus for justification.

Today we celebrate the 494th anniversary of the Reformation. A significant event, not only in Christendom but also our world. So there are many views regarding the nature of the Reformation. Some see Luther as an ecclesiastical rebel who wanted to overthrow an ancient oppressive church. But Luther wasn't trying to attack the Catholic Church, he only wanted the gospel of Christ preached freely within the church. Others think Luther was an social revolutionary. But he was convinced that society would never improve until people experienced the transforming power of Christ. Still others see Luther as a champion of the freedom of conscience and individual freedom. But Luther didn't say, "My conscience is free." He said, "My conscience is bound to the word of God."

Luther's real cause was the restoring of the gospel, the good news of God's own way of putting people right with Himself. (***"A righteousness from God."*** (Romans 3: 22) Luther focused on two main ideas. First, God is God in all his sovereignty and holiness. Second, man is man in all of his sinfulness and unrighteousness. The treasure of the church is the Gospel, because it brings the two together. It takes man's hand and puts it in God's hand. Paul sums it up this way: ***"For 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)

Being put right with God is a simple way of stating the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. How does God make us right with Himself? Is it by giving us his law so that we would obey His commandments? (***"No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."*** (Romans 3: 20) NO! Getting right with God has nothing to do with law. God's law demands perfection and none of us can live up to that standard. So how does this rightness take place? ***"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... (All) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."*** (Romans 3: 22 – 25) God puts right everyone who believe in Jesus. ***"Therefore we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."*** (Romans 3: 28) This is the heart of the gospel and of the Reformation teachings of: sola fide; sola gratia; solus Christus, so let's look at these three doctrines.

When we say sola fide, by faith alone, the emphasis is not on our faith but on Him whom our faith is anchored. It's not just having an opinion about Jesus or believing that what He taught is the truth or that his way of life is best. Paul doesn't say, "I know what I have believed," but ***"I know in whom I have believed."*** (2 Timothy 1: 12) Faith is total trust in Jesus like a patient who entrusts himself to the surgeon, in life or death.

Then there's sola gratia, grace alone. Paul writes, ***“God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflows to all!” (Romans 5: 15)***

Grace is God's unconditional love, which isn't dependent on the worthiness of its object but freely gives everything necessary for fellowship with God. Unlike other religions, the gospel doesn't ask us to do anything, achieve anything, or meet any requirements. Instead it shows us the heart of God and that He loves sinners just as we are.

Consider the image of God in the story of the prodigal son. The father can't wait until the son gets to the door but instead runs down the road to meet him. The son doesn't even have the chance to speak words of penitence he rehearsed at the swine-trough. Instead, the father embraces him, kisses him, and welcomes him back. *“Here,”* says Luther, *“is pure redemptive love, contrary to all law and all reason.”* Or think of the thief on the cross, who deserved death, but his plea ***“Jesus, remember me...”*** brings the response ***“Today you will be with me in paradise.” (John 23: 42 – 43)*** The depth of man's distress shows the depth of God's grace, with an amazing and glorious result.

Grace is the ultimate demonstration that God is God and that His ways are not our ways. His grace does not seek a lovable object but creates it. In Luther's words, *“Sinners are not loved because they are lovely, they are lovely because they are loved.”* The relationship between God and us is not established on His level, to which we can't ever ascend, but on our level, to which God descends. A right relation to him is not based on what I do but on what Christ has done for me. We don't buy God's favor with our good deeds but we do good deeds because we're grateful for his goodness to us. ***“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4: 19)***

Which brings us to the third Reformation truth, solus Christus, Christ alone. Faith is faith in Christ and grace is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. There's a radical Christ-centeredness about the Christian message. Paul says, ***“I was determined to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2: 2)*** Peter writes, ***“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4: 12)*** When Luther rediscovered the gospel and said, *“In my heart there rules but one article of faith, Christ alone. Christ is the beginning, middle and end of all my theology.”*

In order for us to celebrate the Reformation, we need to lift up our eyes and see no

one but Jesus. Not Luther or anyone else, only Christ. We need to strip away all of the furnishings, the decorations, all the traditions and only see Jesus. See him as the incarnate Son of God. See him as the crucified Savior who endures the pain of your sins and mine and gives His life so that we would be reconciled to God.

The cross is God's way of bringing reconciliation, of healing rifts, of making peace. Usually when a rift occurs, each party waits for the other to make the first move, but the rift only gets deeper. If it's to be healed, then one or the other must take the initiative; go halfway, then more than halfway. What God has done is to go all the way in freely giving uncalculating love to heal the rift of our sin and to draw us to himself. It's a mistake to think that I must do something to make God my friend. The cross tells me: God has done everything in his power to make me his friend. This is the reconciling strategy of the cross, and the strategy we're asked to apply in all human relationships.

When Stanley Jones was missionary in India, a British official told him how he became a changed man. He had first become involved in sexual immorality when he went to Europe to study, leaving his trusting wife behind. When he returned home he continued his double life. Finally, the trust of his wife stabbed him like a knife and he confessed the whole story to her. She turned pale, staggered against the wall, and cried. Watching her, he saw his sin crucifying his wife. Her love was tortured on the cross of his sin. *"That moment,"* he said, *"I saw the meaning of the cross of Christ. I saw from her lesser cross the meaning of the greater cross of him who bore the sins of the world. And when she said through her tears that she would not leave me but would help me back to a new life, I felt the offer of a new beginning made by the crucified Christ. From that moment I was a changed man."*

All the basic emphases of the Reformation, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus*, can be summed up in *sola cruce*, by the cross alone. For there is only one Mediator between God and man, only one bridge between heaven and earth, the crucified and risen Christ. This is the heart of the Reformation, and it is the good news that the church lives by. It's the center of all of our activities. A church true to the gospel is focused on the task of leading people to a personal whole-hearted commitment to their Lord and Savior.

The question before you today, "how are you committing your life here at church in response to God's grace in your life?" Think on that and pray on it, so that you are able to say with Luther: *"Jesus Christ is my Lord who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me from all sins, from death, and the power of the devil...in order that I might be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness - even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."* Amen.