

Grace, Christ, faith: remembering the Reformation

Happy Reformation Day, Brothers and Sisters!

And may the Spirit of the Lutheran Reformation live among us also today!

The last Sunday we already begun to look at what the Reformation was about. Remember how historians and theologians briefly summarized it? In these four phrases, – Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and faith alone.

We already looked at what Scripture alone means. Simply put, we believe and confess that the Holy Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments are, indeed, the very words of the Triune God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, written down by God's chosen servants and preserved till today for our sake.

So that we can know the loving heart of the true God, so that we can know the truth about this world and ourselves, that we can know God's design and wisdom for our lives, and, most importantly, that we can know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that by knowing it we too may have life in His name.

Today we will continue by reflecting on grace alone, Christ alone and faith alone and what they mean for us today. So, first, grace alone. What is this about? It really is about us and God's attitude towards us.

Do you remember what the foundational document for the Lutheran Church is? From 25th of June in 1530? The Augsburg Confession. It summarizes what Lutherans believe. The 1st article confesses what we believe about the Triune God. Who remembers what was the second article on? On ... sin, that's right.

Why would you put the article on sin as the second among twenty-eight articles? Any guesses? Because it is so, so important. Unless we understand, what our situation before God is, how God sees us, we will never be able to appreciate His grace or see the need for Jesus Christ. So, what is our situation?

This is how our Book of Concord describes it, – our “sin is so deep [and horrible] a corruption of [our] nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be [learned and] believed from the revelation of Scriptures.”

And what do the Scriptures say? “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Rom 3:10-12)

Not the most attractive picture. No one is righteous, no one does good, no one seeks God... It is about us. About me. About you. This is our state before God gives us new birth through the water and the Spirit.

This is not how I would like to think of myself. I believe this is not how you would like to think of yourself. But this is what the Word of God reveals. We look at one another and we seem to be pretty decent people. Most of times.

But remember, this is not how our God sees us. He doesn't look at our appearances. He sees our hearts. He sees our desires and cravings. He sees our thoughts. All of them. All of them at once. It can't be, it isn't a nice picture.

Once we reflect on how God sees us, we begin to realize what God's attitude towards us is. It is pure grace. Grace alone that moves Him to come to us, to call us, to rescue us. For there is nothing good in us that would compel Him to do it.

When we find someone likable, we may love them. It is different with our Father. He doesn't look for good and likable people. No! For ... there is none. Instead, He comes to us as we all, and He transforms us.

He gives us new birth, He creates in us new hearts. He makes us good, and righteous. And why does He do this? Because of His grace alone. These are wonderful news for us. For everyone. It means that we all are equal before our Lord. There is nothing anyone can boast about, nothing anyone can demand.

It doesn't matter whether you have been faithful a Christian your whole life or whether you, like the thief on the cross, have just received God's forgiveness. Both are saved by grace alone. What do you think about this?

Does it feel fair? If it doesn't, then we haven't understood our sin and God's undeserved grace. Then we still think that God needs to accept us because of our goodness and reject others because they are not as good as we. Then we need to repent and ask for God's forgiveness because of our arrogance.

We all, the best of us, and the worst of us, we all are saved by God's undeserved grace alone. What a joy for those who are not perfect, what a comfort for those who have messed up their lives. God saves us not based on our merit, but because of His grace alone. It means that He offers His salvation to everyone.

No requirements. No conditions attached. You can be the worst human being alive, and the Triune God offers you His love and eternal life, – by grace alone. Rejoice, for this is the message that gives you life, true life.

What was the second phrase? Christ alone. That's right. Okay, God loves us, calls us, accepts us by His grace alone. But how does He do that? How can we have access to His grace? The answer is, – through Christ alone.

That's right. There is no other way to the Father, no other way given to the humanity back to their Creator, but only through His Son, Jesus Christ. Some people misunderstand this as something narrow and exclusive, when in fact this is the most inclusive message ever. How so?

Some may say that one should be able to choose their own way to God. Some believe that all religions would ultimately lead to the same destination. Some believe that they can have access to God wherever they choose, be it in nature, or may be looking deep into their own hearts, or wherever else.

The Scriptures says that we have access to God in Christ alone. Then how could this be inclusive? It is actually very simple. In all religions and belief systems there is something that you need to do to obtain... whatever you want to obtain.

So, if you do what you are supposed to do, and if you succeed, and only if you succeed, and you can never know whether you have succeeded or not, but only the one who succeeds can hope to get the reward.

The question then is this, – who is responsible for your salvation, or whatever someone calls it? Who is responsible for obtaining it? And the answer is, – that's right – I, me, myself. You see, the choice between Christ alone and other belief systems as possible ways to eternal life is not about choosing between Jesus Christ and that deity, or that prophet, of that religious teacher... it is always either about Christ or you.

That is the choice. Either you follow whatever rules and principles you want to follow, and then hope that you may have done enough, or we accept God's gift in Jesus Christ, where He says. "It is finished."

Everything that had to be done is done. Jesus has done it. There is nothing left for you to do. Just receive the eternal life with the Triune God in the New Heavens and the New Earth as God's gift. As undeserved, unmerited gift of your loving Father in heaven. This is what we call true inclusivity.

In Christ alone every single person has equal chances to receive the eternal life as God's gift. Not only those who have done something, not only those who are considered good in this world, but every single person, whatever lowly, or whatever imperfect you may seem in your own eyes or the eyes of this world.

In Jesus Christ alone you are included in God's own family. It is the Father's gift to you. Gracious gift. Undeserved gift. Unconditional gift. You just need to ... there is this one thing you need to do...

You need to ... yes, to receive this gift. And how do we receive this most precious gift of eternal life with the Son of God? And here we come to our last Reformation phrase, – we receive it by faith alone. That's it. By faith alone.

What does this mean? One aspect of this is rather easy to understand, even if it is so contra-intuitive. By faith alone, it means that you don't need to do anything. No merits required, no hidden price tag attached.

It is by faith alone. And this is where even some, who call themselves Christians get it wrong. We misunderstand what this faith is. We may think that this is about knowing that there was such a person as Jesus Christ. "O, yes, I believe that there once lived a man from Nazareth, called Jesus."

No, this is not the faith we are talking about. Nor is this about my faith. So many say that they have their faith. Meaning, that they believe in something. No, this isn't the faith we are talking about. Everyone believes in something.

The knowledge of God is built into us. We can't erase it. But this is not the faith we are talking about. What we are talking about is the faith where we fear and love and trust in the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit above all things. And this faith is not something that we do.

This faith is God's gift to us. This faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. When we hear what the Father and the Son have done for us, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts, He creates in us these deep longings to be loved and embraced by the holy God.

When the Holy Spirit creates this faith, then we fear to disappoint our God, as children fear to disappoint their loving parents. Then we love this God, and we want to keep His Commandments and to do everything to please Him, for everything He has done and does for us.

Then we trust this God, that whatever happens, He will always be with us, will always protect us, will always care for us, and nothing, nothing in the entire creation will be able to separate us from this God.

The Holy Spirit then leads us to Jesus. We want to hear about Him more, we want to know everything about Him, we want to be with Him, where He invites us, in the Divine Service, we want to hear His words of forgiveness and to be united with Him in His Holy Meal.

This is what we are talking about. This faith is living and active. It seeks to be with the Triune God, it seeks to express our gratitude by serving all those many people, whom God has placed in our lives.

This faith gives us divine joy, and it gives us peace that surpasses all our understanding. This faith alone helps us to see our situation before God, it opens our eyes to see God's grace, and it leads us to Jesus in His Church, and through Jesus and His Church into eternal life.

This is what the Reformation was about. To lead us back to the Word of God, the Scripture alone. To restore the life changing message what was lost during long centuries. To bring into spot-light what we know as the Gospel. Grace alone, Christ alone and faith alone. And we are the heirs of the Lutheran Reformation.

We are here to lighten the world with these Good News, and may the gracious God, who caused His Church to be reformed, do it again, and may He shape all of us to be His tools, fitting for His good purposes.

Blessed Reformation Day, Brothers and Sisters! Amen.