

# Saved By Grace

Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

## ***Romans 3:19-28***

The legendary account tells us that on October 31<sup>st</sup> in 1517, the priest Martin Luther defiantly nailed his protest notice to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These *Ninety-five Theses* were a list of abuses and errors that Luther understood to be a corruption of the purpose and mission of the Church. In reality, the *Ninety-five Theses* were not really a defiant protest as much as they were a sincere call for the Church to begin addressing some of its problems that Luther felt had obscured the Gospel message.

Luther hoped that his reforms would be seen and discussed as a step toward the renewal of the Church, so that people might know the truth about God's forgiveness for their lives. Romans 3:19-28 had fired his soul and Luther's joy so overflowed that he had to share the truth with everyone. Little did he know the enormous impact on the world that his one simple act would have. His willingness to stand up in the name of the Gospel of Christ changed the face of history, and the face and direction of the entire Christian Church.

I bring this up for two reasons. First, because today is Reformation Sunday, and our congregation belongs to the Reformed Tradition of churches that trace its history to Martin Luther's understanding of what is truly essential: Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone. So it's good for us to be reminded of our heritage and our beliefs.

Second, I mention this because a few weeks ago I presented a lesson entitled "Why Go to Church?" in which the group discussed the various reasons why people join or decline to join a congregation. The conversation, limited by time and script, left some participants wanting more; friends challenged me to dig deeper and to answer, personally, some questions about my ministry. 1) Why do I subscribe to the Protestant tradition and to the Presbyterian Church in particular? 2) Who are the greatest influences in my life and ministry? 3) What are some key scriptures that speak to me? 4) What was/is my personal calling to the ministry? 5) What is the future of this congregation? In the next few weeks I will begin to address these important questions more fully. So, here goes.

Growing up I had a nickname: Peter Perfect. It was not a term of endearment. I was so named because I try to too hard be perfect, always. I am the classic overachiever. Even my blood type is A+! I work hard. I put in long hours. I want everything a certain way (my way!). And I can get very disgruntled when things don't go according to my carefully laid plan. As Peter Perfect, I thought I had to be perfect in order to be accepted. As Peter Perfect, I believed my self-worth to be wrapped up in what he could produce. As Peter Perfect, I measured success by the tangible results that could be measured. As Peter Perfect, I had stomach pains, nervous ticks, sleepless nights, and very few friends.

Fortunately, Peter Perfect has quietly faded away. He is but a shadow of his former self, but he still rears his nearly perfect head from time to time. Peter Perfect's hold on my life was broken by a series of life altering events. He got married, which meant he couldn't be right all of the time. Then he had kids, which meant he couldn't be right any of the time. Then he went to work in the church, which meant he could only be right when he was working according to God's plan. Peter Perfect is defeated. May he rest in perfect peace!

Here's my point: Peter Perfect thought it was what he did that mattered, but Doug Dent has learned, albeit slowly and imperfectly, that it is who you know that matters. I know Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again for me. He forgave my sins, loved me through my imperfections, and extended me his grace to carry on living. Or, as the Apostle Paul wrote, *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law* (3:28).

What a liberating thought! It means I don't have to be perfect anymore. I can work myself to death trying to be perfect, but it will not alter the grace God has already given to me through Christ. And I can fail a thousand times to be perfect, but it will not revoke the forgiveness afforded me by my Savior. God already loves me, not for who I am on my own, but for who I am becoming in Jesus Christ. It is my faith in his saving work that puts me in God's good graces.

To paraphrase Phillip Yancey, there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. God already loves me as much as an infinite God can love.

This is a vitally important aspect to consider when answering the question, Why am I a member of the Protestant Church? Before the Reformation, the Christian church taught that the way to heaven required an excess of good deeds on life's balance sheet. Even the Jewish

faith believed that the only way to make God happy was to live perfectly according to the law. Working our way upward then, toward perfection, was the only guarantee to a blissful, eternal life.

Martin Luther and other reformers changed all that. Picking up on Paul's words to the Romans, Luther understood that our salvation rests in God's hands, not our own. Left to our own devices, we could not achieve our own salvation, for we are sinful and imperfect; relying on works of the law would get us nowhere, because eventually we would disobey and go astray, and all our work would be in vain.

But if our faith is in Jesus Christ, we can be assured of our salvation; for even if our faith falters, our faith is in the One who never falters. We can be imperfect, because the object of our faith is perfect. We can be human and sinful, yet faith-filled because Jesus is divine and sinless and faithful to us. It is not who we are, but who Jesus is that matters. It is not perfection that wins us salvation, but faith in a perfect Savior that binds us to God's promised kingdom. Or as Martin Luther put it, "Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world."

This is why I am a Protestant: because I believe that despite my imperfections God loved me enough to send Jesus to die for my sins and to raise me up to new life. My salvation is not a matter of my adherence to the Law, but rests completely in the hands of the God who created me inherently imperfect, sometimes sinful, but honestly human. And the same is true for all the members of the church: we are loved and saved, despite our selves.

And yet, according to the book of 1 Peter, we *are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (2:9). Each one of us is called by God, endowed with special gifts, and sent out to proclaim Christ's death and resurrection to a weak and weary world in desperate need of some good news. Every person who believes that Christ died and rose again for him or for her – each believer – is ordained to preach this good news. Not just the perfect Christians, or the pretty Christians, or the successful Christians, or the super-hard-working Christians, but ALL who believe are called to serve.

I subscribe to the Protestant tradition, and to the Presbyterian Church in particular, because I affirm this Priesthood of All Believers. Prior to the Reformation, ministry was exclusively

reserved for the clergy; only those ordained could claim to do God's work. But the Reformation's leaders recognized the greater call of God to all who believed. I believe it is this joining of all people in God's great work that makes the Church strong. I believe it is open, honest, healthy debate by people with diametrically differing views that makes the Church truly representative of God's creation. I believe it is individuals seeking to live out God's call within the community of the faithful, which makes the Church the greatest instrument of God's will on earth.

- I belong to Christ's Church because I know myself to be a sinner, yet loved by God, forgiven and redeemed by Christ, and called by the Holy Spirit to preach the good news I know to be true.
- I belong to Christ's Church because I accept as true that God is sovereign over all creation, including me, and that God's Word has great power over my life.
- I belong to Christ's Church because I assert that the priesthood of all believers is how God intends bring about the kingdom on earth.
- I belong to Christ's Church because I assert that we are called into covenant life by a God who is faithful even when we are not; and that the covenant to be God's people endures despite our differences.
- I belong to Christ's Church because I acknowledge my call and declare my intent to be part of God's plan for the transformation of this world.
- I belong to Christ's Church because I affirm, that I am saved by God's grace, not by the works of my own hands, so that I might proclaim Christ crucified and risen.
- I belong to Christ's Church because he saved me and called me to serve. The Church isn't perfect, but neither am I. Together, you and me and Christians worldwide, we are the greatest hope for this world.