

October 25, 2020 – Romans 3:19-28

What does it mean to be Lutheran? It seems like a good question to ponder today. It is Reformation Sunday, after all. A few days from now will mark the 503rd anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral.

His intent at the time was really quite mundane. Luther didn't intend to change the course of the Christian church and reshape the world as we know it. He simply wanted to engage in some public discourse about a few rather obvious corruptions in the Roman Catholic Church of his day.

But what ended up happening set off a powder keg in 16th century Germany. Because he was right. The Roman Catholic Church was corrupt. Even more corrupt than Luther realized, at that moment. Corrupt in its leadership, its politics, and, most of all, in its theology. And something did need to change. Luther just happened to be the one man with both the theological acumen to identify it and the backbone to speak up about it.

And before long, Luther had done something he had never, ever intended to do. He had started a new church. His effort to reform Rome was a losing battle. But his effort to reform the Church was wildly successful. So successful that those following him no longer called themselves Roman Catholics, but Lutherans.

And they too asked that question: What does it mean to be Lutheran? And so, quite early in the reformation, three statements were written to quickly and easily define what this new church believed. We've actually got them written on a banner in the front of our sanctuary this morning.

They're known as the three solas of the Reformation: sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura. Latin for faith alone, grace alone, and scripture alone. And they summarize a wealth of Lutheran doctrine. To the point that we could easily say that to be Lutheran is to confess faith, grace, and scripture alone.

And yet, even that is not quite satisfactory. And the reason I say that is because you can walk into just about any conservative Christian church in America and say, "I believe in faith, grace, and scripture alone." And they will say, "Sure. So do we!"

Baptist. Pentecostal. Nondenominational. I would even venture to say that there are a handful of Roman Catholics that would make that claim. Yet, these are supposed to be the things that separated us from Rome. The things that make us distinctly Lutheran. So how is that possible?

Well, truth be told, the three solas are a decent teaching tool. But they're not a complete confession of faith. There is so much more to a Lutheran understanding of faith, grace, and scripture than the words themselves convey. And so while it's very nice to have a banner like this on our walls, it's even more important that we understand what those words mean.

So, let's start with faith. Faith alone. That's easy. We all understand what faith is, right? Or do we? I think if you asked the average Christian in church today they would actually give you a wide variety of definitions for faith.

Some would say that faith is about what we know. It's about knowing scripture and knowing doctrine. And clinging to these truths that we've learned, without doubt or hesitation, even when the world tries to tell us we're crazy for doing so.

Others would say that faith is about what we feel. Faith is the warmth and peace and joy that we get even when everything is falling apart around us. It's about the feeling of being loved and comforted even when you're utterly alone.

Both definitions sound pretty good. But I think Luther would disagree with both ideas. Faith isn't about what you know or about what you feel. Because faith isn't about what we do at all. Faith is a gift.

Take a look at the Bible's own definition of faith in Hebrews 11. The old King James actually translates this one best, I think: faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. As human beings, we can only hope with our heart and see with our eyes. We can only look at faith as something we feel or something we know.

But what God gives us is a faith that goes beyond feeling or knowledge. A faith that's the substance of what we hope for. The flesh and blood substance of Jesus Christ. Without the work of God in us, our hope would be empty. Meaningless. Futile. But when God steps in, when he literally sets foot on earth, He gives it substance and it becomes more than hope. It becomes faith.

And that faith is the evidence of things unseen. Your mind can only know those things that you can see and hear and feel. But when God steps in, suddenly your mind has evidence that goes beyond sight and sound and touch. The evidence of faith. *"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe,"* Jesus tells Thomas. We are blessed by God with faith in the resurrection.

So faith is a gift. Luther called faith "the hand that holds onto the cross." Without faith you can't grasp God's love, shown to you on the cross. You can't hold onto it through sin and temptation, doubt and persecution.

Without faith, God can offer you the gift of eternal life over and over again, but you can't take hold of it, because you don't even have the hands to receive it. The cross is meaningless to you without faith. The empty tomb is meaningless to you without faith. The promise of a resurrection from the dead is meaningless to you without faith.

Faith is essential. Because without faith, God's grace is pointless. You can never take hold of it. And yet, that's the really interesting part of what Luther discovered. You cannot receive God's grace without faith, and yet faith itself is a part of God's grace. As our Epistle Lesson said, *"A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."*

There is nothing you can do to create faith. No law that you can follow. No work that you can do. It is given to you as a gift entirely apart from observing the law.

And it must be. Because if it weren't, then we could always look at our faith and see it lacking. As Paul says, through the law only comes the knowledge of our sin. If we try to use the law to create faith, we're only going to succeed in proving how little faith we have on our own.

That's the amazing thing about God's grace. We don't need to worry about how much we believe in Jesus. We only need to worry about how much God the Father believes in the work of His Son. Because He's the one putting faith into our hearts. And if He believes that the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross is sufficient to cover all of our sins, then that is the very faith that saves us. No matter what we know. No matter what we feel. We are saved by faith.

A faith that is God's very grace poured out on us. A grace that is revealed to us time and time again in scripture. Scripture that exists not to tell us what to know or what to feel. But scripture that points us to Jesus. That tells us what he did for us.

Faith alone. Grace alone. Scripture alone. They're not actually three separate things. In fact, in Luther's mind, they were completely inseparable. Faith that isn't an act of God's grace, isn't faith. Grace that isn't found in scripture, isn't grace. And scripture that isn't read with the hope and eyes of faith, isn't scripture.

They are a unified whole. And together they are called the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was for the Gospel that Luther was persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. It was for the Gospel that the Christians of Germany flocked to Luther's teachings and called themselves Lutherans. And it is the Gospel that separates us a church body.

What does it mean to be Lutheran? It means to believe in the Gospel. An audacious, incomparable Gospel of faith and grace and scripture. That's sets you free not only from sin and death and the Law. But sets you free from yourselves. Because it is a freedom that comes freely. We are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption of His Son. And if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Amen.