

Reformation Sunday - First Sunday of End Time
October 31, 2010
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Ephesians 2:1-10

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (NIV)

If a poll were taken and the question: “What does October 31 mean to you?” was asked, certainly nearly every American would answer, “It’s Halloween, trick or treat time.” But I am convinced few people know the true significance of October 31 and Halloween. The name “Halloween” comes from “All hallows’ even” or “All holy ones’ evening.” It is the evening before All Saints’ Day, November 1. For centuries, the Christian Church celebrated that festival in remembrance and thanks for all the saints - all who are holy in God’s sight through faith in Jesus Christ. It’s a day to remember those saints who have fought the good fight of faith and now rest from their labors in heavenly glory.

But for you and me we have another reason to celebrate and remember October 31 because you and I are Lutherans. We celebrate the Reformation and take our stand on the truths of God’s Word proudly confessing salvation in Jesus Christ—by grace alone, through faith alone. Today, we recall how God worked in the life of a saint named Martin Luther, and how God has worked in our own lives. As we look at these beautiful verses from Scripture may we recognize: ***Today Is a Celebration of Grace!***

We know it well and love to repeat this Biblical refrain: “***It is by grace you have been saved...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.***” But it is one thing to know and say it, and another thing completely to trust and believe it. It is still another thing to see this grace actually played out in human lives. And today we celebrate a vivid example of God’s grace in the life of a child born to Hans and Margaret Luther in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483. There are many, many books written and many stories to tell about the man known as Martin Luther. If you don’t know his story read it and listen to it, and even if you have heard it all, it is worth hearing again. For Luther’s story is a celebration of grace. God, who is rich in mercy, made Luther alive even when he was dead in his sins.

What made Luther dead in sin? The same thing that makes all of us dead in our transgressions and sins. We are born that way. We inherit our sinfulness from our parents as did our parents from their parents. That sinful nature quickly plays itself out in our lives with actual sins. We fight, bite, and lie. We are selfish and disobedient. We sin and sin and sin and our sinning is not something to just excuse saying everyone else does it too. Our sins are not things to be taken lightly. Our sins are the reason we die. Our sins deserve to be punished. Did you read what Paul writes in these verses? ***“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”*** Because of our sin we deserve the almighty God’s wrath now and forever. Do we recognize that? Before we can really celebrate God’s grace we too need to understand why God’s undeserved love is so necessary?

And that was one thing about Luther, even when He was young, that he was well aware of every day. Luther had a tender conscience. His sins were always before him and he saw God as an angry Judge ready to strike him down. Perhaps you’ve heard this story. Luther graduated near the top of his class all the way through school and his hard working copper mining dad sent him off to the university to be a top lawyer. But one night Luther was caught in a bad storm. He was afraid. He thought God was sending the thunder and lightning to smite him and he prayed. He prayed not to God but as he had falsely learned to the saints and cried out: *“St. Anne, mother of Mary, save me! I promise to become a monk.”* Luther made it home safely and much to the chagrin of his father the next day Luther left the university to enter a monastery.

It was here in this monastery that Luther learned the hard way that dead in sin means dead. What I mean it there was nothing Luther could do to save himself from even one sin. He was helpless. There wasn’t a deed so great to win him God’s favor. No amount of good works could bring him peace. Although he tried and tried and tried again. He deprived himself from good things and isolated himself from the sinful world. He fasted for days & spent sleepless nights in prayer. He even beat himself in an attempt to fight the sins that constantly tempted him. Once he locked himself in a room for days as punishment and a few days later his fellow monks forced the door open and found him unconscious. Yet, Luther never felt he did enough. Listen to his own sad words: *“Even the name of Christ often frightened me, and when I looked on Him and the cross, He seemed to me like a flash of lightning. When people mentioned his name, I would rather have heard the devil mentioned. For I believed that I would have to do good works until they made Christ love me and forgive me.”* (Nohl 34)

For some time Luther went on like this following the way of the world and listening to the lies of the devil. But these questions always remained: How could he be sure God loved him? How many good works are necessary to satisfy a holy God? How could he ever be certain he was saved? In his conscience he knew he couldn’t. He knew it would never be enough. Salvation could never be certain. He was dead - dead in sin and unable to save himself.

But now enter the grace of God! Luther was changed not by a trip to Rome, not by some great experience, but in a quiet way that no one from the outside would have really noticed. You see Luther became a preacher and professor at the university of Wittenberg and there Luther began to read the Bible. Here it was not so much that Luther found God, but God found Martin Luther! God in His grace found him in the same place He finds you and me - on the pages of His Holy Word. Faith comes from

hearing the message. Luther's story is not so much about a man who changed the world forever as some books claim, but about a God who changed a man forever. Luther began to see in God's Word a God of love. On every page of Scripture He began to see a story of God's undeserved love for him in Jesus. Luther saw a Savior who came to take his place under the law. He saw a Savior who was willing to become an object of God's wrath for him. He saw a Savior who suffered and died on a cross to remove all his sins - a Savior who assured him of life forever with a victory over death. Luther saw that salvation is not something that can be or is earned, but something that is a free gift in Jesus. He learned to know and trust and believe that it is by grace he had been saved, through faith in Jesus. And even this saving faith is a gift from God's hand. For the first time in his life Luther felt alive because he was no longer dead in sin but made alive in Christ Jesus.

For the first time Luther knew the peace and joy of walking in God's grace. That was something Luther was not about to let go! Not even when the church kicked him out. Not even when He stood in front of emperor Charles at the Diet of Worms and was ordered to recant of everything he had written and been teaching. Instead, Luther replied: *"My conscience is captive to the Word of God...Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."* Not even when a ban was placed on His life and Luther had to go into hiding and live as a fugitive for years. Not even on his deathbed, in 1546, when Luther was asked if he was willing to die in the name of Christ and the doctrine he had preached. Luther clearly answered "yes" then passed away. Luther was not about to let go of the gift of grace.

Nor was Luther about to keep this message of grace to himself! That's why Luther posted the 95 theses or concerns for debate inside the church. That's why Luther's life was devoted to translating the entire Bible into the common language of the people. That's why he spend countless hours writing catechisms, and devotions, and hymns, and sermons. Luther indeed was ***"God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*** Luther was not anti good works, he was God's workmanship. Luther was never against good works, God just opened his eyes to realized they have no part in our salvation. It is by grace you have been saved.

Today is a celebration of grace - not just in the life of Martin Luther, but in our own lives as well. We know the joy and peace that comes from having Jesus as our Savior. We too were dead, but now are alive in Christ. We walk in His mercy. We know our sins are forgiven. We know that heaven is our eternal home. We know it is all by grace, through faith, in the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Let us, like Luther, never toss this grace aside. May we never throw this gift away. Like Luther, we too are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. May we do all we can to spread the message of God - a message of grace.

I've often said that I don't think Martin Luther would even like us to use his name and call ourselves Lutherans. This week I actually found the proof. Listen to what he said: *"I ask that men make no reference to my name and call themselves, not Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? After all, the doctrine is not mine, nor have I been crucified for anyone. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How, then, should I, a poor evil smelling maggot sack have men give to the children of Christ my worthless name? Not so, dear*

friends. Let us cast out party names and be called Christians after Him whose doctrine we have.”

This is why, my friends, I proudly call myself a Lutheran. For to be Lutheran is to stand on what Luther stood - to stand on the merits of Jesus my Savior. To stand on His Word alone - to preach Christ crucified and risen. To celebrate God's grace today and everyday. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** Amen.