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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Reformation Sunday
October 31, 2021
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

There's a powerful scene from a PBS documentary about Martin Luther that shows him in the monastery he entered when he was 21 years old. In the film, Luther is down on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor of the monastery until his fingers bleed. And when he didn't think he did it well enough, he scrubbed and scrubbed some more. The next scene shows him in his monk's cell beating his bare back with a whip, pleading with God to forgive him of his sinfulness.

Martin Luther once believed he could never do enough to earn God's favor and to please God. He was wracked with guilt and felt the weight of God's judgment on his shoulders. In fact, he later wrote that his time in the monastery was actually one of deep spiritual despair. He said, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul."

Many years later Luther got his doctorate and became a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, and it was only then while he was preparing a lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans that he read and understood in a whole new light this passage (that we heard today) from Romans 3: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Can you even imagine what it was like for Luther, who for years and years tried to earn God's grace by doing works, to realize when he was preparing to teach Romans 3 that he himself was justified by God's grace as a gift? Can you imagine what relief and astonishment washed over him when he realized that he had been trying everything to attain God's mercy when all along it was free? Can you actually feel what Luther might have felt when he realized that he didn't have to be perfect to please God, and in turn learning that he didn't have to please everyone else in order to have worth? In fact, it was learning that he was justified, made right with God, that gave Luther the

will to stand up to abuses of the Catholic church at the time, even if it caused him to be excommunicated from the church.

You know, most of us sitting here today would call ourselves Lutherans, or at least comfortable with Lutheran theology. We know cognitively that we are justified, made right with God, by grace. We would say that God's mercy and grace are free gifts. We even know that we don't have to be perfect to please God or please others. We know those truths. But I'm wondering how much of what we know up here [in our heads], really gets to here [our hearts].

The reason I say that is because I think we good Lutherans still worry that we're not meeting God's expectations or the expectations of others—that we aren't enough.

There's something in our human nature that tells us that our worth lies in how perfect we are and if we please God and please other people. But we never seem to have enough faith, enough knowledge, enough status, enough time, enough in our bank account.

We don't feel like we do enough, and what we do we feel like we're not doing well enough. We worry about the expectations others place on us and whether we can meet them. And mostly we worry about the expectations we place on ourselves, and how often we don't meet those expectations.

I think I've told you the story of when I was doing my seminary internship, like Intern Pastor Jory, that my internship committee sat me down and read me the story of John the Baptist declaring that he was not the messiah in John chapter 1. I think they read it to me because I was always thinking and saying that I wasn't doing enough, and what I was doing I wasn't doing well enough. This was the same me who was mortified when I got a B+ in a class in seminary.

Anyway, they got done reading the passage from John and my internship committee chair looked up at me and said, "Jana, there is only one messiah, and you are not it."

What he said has clearly stuck with me for more than 20 years because the devastating result of not letting what you know here about your salvation

and worth get into here (heart) is that you keep trying to be some form of a perfect messiah—to prove to God and to other people how good you are.

But what if the gift of the Lutheran Reformation for us today is the reminder that you are enough. Now. Not sometime in the future when you're smarter or richer or more organized or more perfect.

What if because of the Lutheran Reformation you believed that your worth doesn't lie in a grade, in a job evaluation, in a bank account, or in what others think of you.

The gospel that we hear every single Reformation Sunday is from John chapter 8—Jesus saying, “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” But the truth Jesus is talking about here isn't an intellectual truth—Jesus isn't saying you have to learn even more in order to be free. Jesus says later in John that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Knowing the truth means knowing Jesus. And when we **know** Jesus we are free from having to **be** Jesus, to be the messiah.

The key to living in the gift of the reformation is believing that Jesus has already done the work for you. It's trusting that your worth lies in your identity as God's beloved child. You are free from perfectionism and proving yourself to God and other people because your worth has already been proven by Jesus.

And even though your church council might secretly want to say that the higher the amount you put on your pledge card that in just a few moments you'll place on the altar, the more Jesus will love you, it's a lie. Jesus loves you no matter what that number is.

And it's because Jesus loves us first and that's where our worth lies that we're able to release abundantly to God who abundantly blesses us, not because we have to prove something to God, to others, or to ourselves.

I pray that this Reformation Sunday and all the days that lie ahead, you remember the truth that will set you free—you belong to Jesus, and because of that, you are enough. Amen.

During the next hymn/Open Space, you are invited forward to place your pledge card in the offering plate on the altar. If it's hard to make it up the

stairs, Intern Pastor Jory will hold a plate down below to receive your pledge card. Thank you for your generosity to God and to your congregation.