

The Festival of the Reformation

John 8:31-36

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday

This is the Festival of the Reformation, the Sunday before October 31st, when in 1517 a monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses against the sale of indulgences to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This long list of points to be debated was written in Latin and intended for discussion among his fellow scholars, but the Theses were quickly translated into German, made into cartoons and drawings, and soon everybody was talking about them.

Some Lutherans today say that we should no longer celebrate this event, no longer celebrate the Reformation because it has all been settled.

In fact, twenty-five years ago, there was a huge celebration in Augsburg, Germany over a new agreement, signed by LWF officials and the Vatican, which said that things between Lutherans and Catholics have been settled. It was titled *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ). The Reformation was over. The breach is healed. The problem solved.

To be sure, many Lutherans and even some Catholics scoffed at JDDJ, saying it merely papered over differences rather than solving them. Gerhard Forde, a preeminent American Luther scholar, said that the LWF has given away the family farm. It had sold out to the Vatican.

And there were many others who said the proof of the pudding is in the eating. What will this great new agreement produce? What has it produced in twenty-five years? Nothing.

It's true that in 2006 the World Methodist Council adopted that document and they represent 80 million Methodists in the world. (The World Communion of Reformed Churches also endorsed JDDJ in 2017.)

But in 2007 Pope John Paul II put out an encyclical, *Dominus Jesus*, in which the Vatican questioned whether Lutherans and other Protestants are even "church" because they lack the sacramental, priestly hierarchy through which special grace comes. That created a stir.

The big stumbling block between Lutherans and Catholics, the basic issue theologically, is: What is your final authority? For Roman Catholics, it is the Pope. He is the one who decides on faith and morals, that is, he is the final authority on matters of law and matters of faith. For Catholics final authority is in the Magisterium of the Church and finally Papal Infallibility.

For Lutherans, final authority is not a person or an institution. Rather, it is the living Word itself – the proclamation that salvation is “by Christ alone, through the cross alone, by faith alone.”

These are totally different ways of establishing identity and mission through time.

Today I’d like to take up a related issue. As we have noted, what kicked everything into gear in Luther’s day was this matter called indulgences. You might think that indulgences died out after the Reformation, but that’s not the case. They are alive and well in the Roman Catholic Church today.

What it’s really about is: What is sin? As Mark Twain put it: Remember the Baptist preacher who preached on sin. He said: “I’m agin’ it.”

What is it? What is this sin business? We can get at this by talking about economics. Economic thinkers ask: Why do people act the way they do?

Back in 1992 an economist, Gary Becker, from the University of Chicago, got the Nobel Prize for his research in behavioral economics, into why people give to charities. What Gary Becker did was set up a series of games designed to test players’ decisions to give to others. His conclusion was: We like to help. We like barn raisings. We want to help others caught in trouble, a tsunami, or a famine in Kenya. We want to help. Becker concluded that was that there is something in us, like a gene for unselfishness. There is something basic in us about giving unselfishly.

A few years later along came John List, another economics professor at the University of Chicago. In one of List’s research projects on charitable giving, he and his team sent out 300,000 postcards to potential charitable donors in Alaska. Some donors received postcards that appealed to readers’ sense of self. They read “Warm Your Heart.” Other donors received postcards that highlighted the importance of giving to others. They read “Make Alaska Better for Everyone.”

Can you guess the results? People who received the postcards that said “Warm Your Heart,” gave more than those who received postcards that said: “Make Alaska Better for Everyone.”

Messages that reinforced the warm glow of giving for donors produced larger gifts. In short, people gave more when they felt affirmed in their self-image as good, broadminded, and compassionate people. Even in giving there is a calculation with self-interest.

With that then we can look again at this whole debate in the Reformation about sin and indulgences. In Roman Catholic thinking, yes, there is original sin, but even the individual who is not a Christian has a bent toward God. In Latin, it’s called *habitus*. This idea is expressed succinctly in that famous saying of St. Augustine: “My heart is restless ‘til it finds rest in thee.” We all have a bent toward God.

In the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, the Lutheran team asked the Catholics: Can you do it differently? "Can you talk about it differently than the *habitus*?" They said, "No, this is the way it is."

For Catholics, Baptism eliminates original sin; What is left is weakness, but not sin. For them, sin is a personal act, a willful act violating God's law. In their view, our task is to choose the right and do good. As we do that, we become saintly and we gain merit.

Again, the Lutheran team asked: "Can you find another conceptuality? A word other than 'merit'?" And again, the Catholics said, "No, this is the way it is."

The Lutheran side pointed out that there is original sin, and we are all caught in it. For Lutherans, sin is transpersonal; it is a power determining us even before we are aware of it. Sin really is rebellion against God, that is, we are determined to rebel against being his creatures; we'd rather be gods ourselves and do things our own way.

When we are baptized, the Lord makes us his own. We are covered with the righteousness of Christ, but at the same time, because we are still in this world, real sin remains in us, not just weakness, but real sin. Not only that, but even our best works are sinful, as Isaiah 64:6 says: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags."

There is that famous formula that Lutherans have that we are "simultaneously justified and sinner at the same time." It's not that we're partly justified and partly sinful; it's "totally" justified and "totally" sinful at the same time. It also doesn't mean that I am not yet saved, that there is more I must do to make it work. Rather, once baptized, I am immediately and totally God's own.

Our task is to ask ourselves: What does that mean for living here and now? It means freedom, the freedom that is mentioned in John 8:31-36. We don't have to ask ourselves: Have I done enough? Have I done it correctly, earnestly? Because otherwise I would say: I'm supposed to do good and gain merit, but have I done it right? Have I been earnest enough?

When we fall into the trap of thinking: "Yes, I really have done good and done it sincerely," we end up in spiritual pride. If we realize how prideful we are, how we trust in works, we fall into spiritual despair.

As you know, what was most remarkable about Luther was his honesty. He would not fool himself. He knew how he was caught in pride and despair. He also knew acquit himself. The Lord alone judges.

In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul is under attack by other apostles, and he writes: "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).

The temptation the evil one brings to us is to say: "You can know, you can decide. You can judge. You can do it." The answer to that is: "No, we are trapped; we are caught. Only the Lord can help us."

That is basically why what we say is: "We are saved by Christ alone, in the cross alone, by faith alone. And therefore, we are free."

It says in this remarkable text in John 8: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus means freedom. And Romans 8:21: "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Because we are free, we don't have to ask ourselves: What do we do about sin, death, and the devil? Rather, we're free from all that worry and concern, and we can live our lives in this world as his creatures and for others. Amen