

**Romans 3:19-28**

“A people who forget their past are doomed to repeat it.” I don’t take credit for these words; others have said them before me. But I do begin this sermon with them because we as a people are in danger of forgetting our past. Fifty years ago in the Lutheran Church, Martin Luther and the Reformation were front and center in the minds of the people when the month of October came to a close. Today Halloween has completely taken over October 31<sup>st</sup> and Martin Luther King is the man who is remembered, not the monk from Wittenberg whom God used to reform the Church.

The world does not care about Reformation Day, but this really should not come as a shock to us. When someone in your family has a birthday, it’s not going to make the news on World News Tonight. Your family will celebrate the birthday, but no one else in the world will know or care. Yet the fact that the rest of the world doesn’t celebrate will not stop you from throwing a party, decorating a cake, blowing out the candles, and opening presents. Everyone else in the world is worrying about the stock market, about the upcoming election, about the war in Iraq, and who will win the World Series. But when there is a birthday in your family, for you that becomes the most important event of the day.

Today we at Christ Lutheran Church celebrate our birthday. Not our congregation’s sesquicentennial. That comes next year—but the birthday of the Lutheran Church. This Friday we may be handing out candy to trick-or-treaters, but today we remember that on October 31, 1517 our Lutheran Church was born. Martin Luther walked up to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany dressed as a monk not to deliver a speech against racism, but to nail to that door his 95 theses. Those statements which showed where the Roman Church was acting contrary to Scripture became the catalyst which gave birth to the Church of the Reformation—our Lutheran Church.

When a family celebrates the birthday of a child, the rest of the family could not even imagine what life would be like if that child had never been born. It’s impossible to think in those terms; and it’s sad to imagine such a thing. The same is true for the birth of our Lutheran Church. It would be a sad and unimaginable thought to wonder what our life would be like today if God had never brought about the Church of the Reformation. What would we believe in our hearts? What would be preached from our pulpits? Would we have the peace of knowing that we are saved by faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the Law? Would we have the pure Gospel preached to us? Would we be able to lay our loved ones in the grave with the confidence that they died trusting not in their goodness, but in Jesus alone?

Thank God that we do not have to wonder about such things. When you celebrate a birthday in your family you thank God for your loved one whose birth you are celebrating. Today we thank God for the birth of our Lutheran Church. We thank God for Martin Luther; for his tenacity; his stubbornness; his hunger for the truth; his love for Christ; his life’s work of teaching the pure Faith which for centuries had been corrupted with errors. Today we celebrate our birthday even though the rest of the world does not care. Today we remember and give thanks that nearly five hundred years ago our beloved church was born on a cold autumn night. And today we open our birthday gifts which are given to us by God Himself. Those gifts are spelled out for us by the Apostle Paul in Romans 3: “For all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...to be received by faith.”

If you really ponder the tradition of opening birthday presents, you may come to the conclusion that the gifts are always opened by the wrong person. The person whose birthday it is opens the gifts, but they really should be opened by their parents. How can a person take credit for being born? We shower presents upon the birthday boy or girl, but they didn't do anything. They did not work hard to cause their birth; their mother did. They did not change their own diapers once they were born, or prepare their baby formula, or rock themselves to sleep; their parents did those things. But for some reason when someone celebrates a birthday, they are the ones who open the gifts.

And the same thing is true with our birth from God. He is the One who brought about our birth. He reformed the Church through Luther. He gave us birth into His Church through Holy Baptism. He did all the work, but we are the ones who open the presents. We fall short of the glory of God. We have sinned against Him. We deserve not even socks and underwear to open as gifts, but eternal punishment for our sinfulness. But God gives what we do not deserve. He justifies you freely by His grace, says St. Paul. This means that you are what you are not, and you are not what you are. You are a saint even though you are not, and you are not a sinner even though you are.

You are justified; you are declared by God to be holy and blameless in His sight. Why? Because Christ died for you. You may have beaten your wife this morning. You may have gotten drunk last night. You may have cussed out your neighbor to his face. God does not hold your sins against you. He charged them to Jesus. He was punished for you. You are forgiven. You and I don't live like saints. We typically act like sinners. But the truth of the Gospel declares that you are God's forgiven sinner for Jesus' sake. There may be nothing saintly about you. That does not change the fact that you are what God has declared you to be. Because you are baptized into the death of Christ, His life is now yours. You are God's saints...and this, friend, is His birthday gift to you.

You and I do not earn such a gift. It's given freely by grace. And it's received, says Paul, by faith. Even before the birthday boy or girl opens their presents, those presents belong to them. The birthday gifts are not auctioned off to the highest bidder. They belong to the one who is celebrating the birthday. But if, for some reason, those gifts are never opened, they still belong to the one having the birthday...in that case he or she, however, will never know the joy of opening the presents that belong to them.

To open God's gifts of grace and life eternal in Christ Jesus is called faith. Without faith the gifts still belong to us; we simply miss out on the joy of having them. Luther made this clear in his writings. Our faith does not cause God to give us His gifts. Our faith merely receives them with joy and thanksgiving. This is a precious birthday gift that God has given to us as Lutheran Christians—to have the right understanding of faith. Faith is not our work; it is a gift of God. Like the eager toddler tearing into his pile of birthday presents, faith is nothing more than laying claim to what belongs to us in Christ; to receive, and open, and enjoy every gift of God.

Those with no faith still have that pile of presents before them. They, too, are justified by grace. They, too, are declared forgiven by God. Christ died also for them. But without

faith those gifts remain unopened. Without faith there is no joy, no thanksgiving, no peace with God, no life in Christ.

Is it any wonder why you who are God's people come here to His House again and again? It's because you have faith. You don't simply come and hear the word of forgiveness; you lay claim to it by faith. You open that gift of God spoken by His pastor, and rejoice that He has forgiven you. You don't simply come and see the Sacrament on the altar; you lay claim to it by faith. You open that gift of bread and wine and rejoice that Christ comes to you here in His flesh and blood.

Every Divine Service is, in a sense, our birthday celebration. And as you know we, the ones who were born of Christ, are the ones who open all the gifts. And every time you come to God's House, because you come in faith, every gift of His which is for you is given to you. So we come not merely to remember. We do come to remember what God did for us through Martin Luther; what God did and does for us in our baptism—but especially, we come to receive; to receive and open by faith His presents to you in Christ Jesus. Amen.