

Romans 3:19-28

Next to Christmas, Halloween is the holiday children love the most. It isn't even really a holiday. But you would have a hard time convincing a child of that. Which other day of the year do they get to dress up in costumes and go around the neighborhood begging for candy? Stores do a whopping business during this time, and it isn't because adults are afraid of getting their windows soaped and their houses egged if they don't have plenty of goodies for trick-or-treaters. Adults, too, like to get into the Halloween spirit. Some decorate their homes more at this time of the year than they do at Christmastime. Black cats, goblins, and witches can be seen on every block. For the past few weeks every time I turn down Fifth Street in Washington, I see a dead body hanging from a noose on someone's front porch. It's probably not real, but it's unnerving just the same.

Now I'm not against Halloween for the most part, but I am glad that instead of going to a Halloween party on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. He wasn't out to have a good time, but God was, through him, out to witness to the world the truth of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. That truth had been hidden away under a covering of superstitions, man-made laws, and false teachings. Even Luther had been under the spell of believing that he had to grasp eternal life in heaven by what he did and how he lived. And it was through his intense struggle in his heart and mind that God brought about the Reformation of the Church, because Luther plunged himself into God's Word to find the answer to his eternal salvation.

What he found is that, in His Word God was finding Martin Luther, and that it was God who was grasping him by the truth. And so, with truth in hand, Luther boldly walked up to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and nailed his now famous 95 theses. And what this means for us is that we now have two days in the Church Year when we celebrate the sound of the pounding of nails—Good Friday, when the Truth was nailed to a wooden cross, and Reformation Day, when the truth of what Jesus' death has done for us was nailed to the church doors in Wittenberg.

If we were living in the old days, back when a funeral casket was nothing more than a wooden box with a lid on top that was nailed shut, we could add here that the only things we will take with us to the grave are wood and nails—a fitting reminder that we can die in peace because our Lord was nailed to a cross for us, and because God used Martin Luther to nail to the Church the truth of Jesus Christ so that our faith and hope are in Him alone.

As our church sign says, "Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone." Many people, even non-Christians, say that they have faith. What they mean is that they have courage; they have hope that things will get better eventually. When St. Paul writes that we are "justified by faith," he is speaking of something completely different from that. Everybody has faith in something. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only faith that counts before God. And that kind of faith is not something we do. It's not a decision we make. It's not some kind of good quality within us. Faith is not even really a thing. You can't measure it. Faith that looks to Christ justifies whether that faith is strong or weak. When faith looks away from Jesus it is weakened and will die. Peter fell under the waves when he took his eyes off of Jesus. But when faith looks to Christ, you have not just a part of Christ, but all of Him.

Faith is God coming to you and filling you with Christ. Faith is not my laying hold of God, but His laying hold of me. And He lays hold of you in His Word. Through the liquid Word of Baptism God laid hold of you, not as the soldiers grasped Jesus to crucify Him, but as a mother lovingly grasps her newborn child. And as that mother nurtures her child day after day, so God lays hold of you in His Word and Sacrament to nurture you in your faith.

Faith is the opposite of fear. Because of his faith in Christ alone, Luther fearlessly proclaimed the Gospel even though the devils were spitting on him the entire time. Because of his faith in Jesus' promise, the thief on the cross was comforted in his dying moments. Even Jesus had faith. He trusted His Father completely, believing that God would deliver Him from the tomb of death. And with such faith you and I can approach the grave without fear—the graves of our loved ones who died in faith, and our own grave which awaits our body. In faith we look to Him who promised, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you...because I live, you shall live also.”

St. Paul says that because of your faith you are justified. Paul wrote these words and Luther explains them for us. To be justified means that God embraces you. Wesley, Zwingli, and many others had it wrong, but Luther understood “justified” through the eyes of the cross. God embraces you, not because of what you have done; not even because you repent and believe in Jesus—He embraces you not because of any good thing in you, but because “God justifies the sinner.” Luther understood that God embraces the sinner in the vile wickedness of his sin and in the rebelliousness of his heart. God loved the world even though the world hated Him. He loved you even while you were a sinner. He declares you to be just and holy for the one reason that Christ died for you.

We are not without sin. A diary of our daily lives would be marked up and down with our disobedience. But the truth of the Gospel, which was rediscovered in the Reformation, is that God does not reject you on account of your disobedience. He does not sentence you to eternal death. Rather, He declares you to be justified, forgiven of all sin, perfectly righteous in His sight. Why? Because Jesus took your place in death. Jesus was sentenced for you. Jesus was rejected by His Father so that you are accepted by Him.

God approaches you in His Word and Sacraments not to punish you, but to replace your fear with faith; to give you Jesus' obedience; to lay upon you the righteousness of Christ; to give you eternal salvation. All of this is true not because I say so, not because Martin Luther says so, but because God, in His Word, says that it is so.

Friend, thank God for the Reformation of the Church. Without the Reformation you would be hearing a very different message today. You would be hearing of God's righteous wrath upon you which is removed, not by faith in Christ alone, but by your obedience to God, your striving to avoid mortal sin, your life lived within the system of penance in the church. Without the Reformation you would not hear the good news that you are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. Without the Reformation you would not hear that you can be certain that eternal life in heaven is yours; you could not go to your grave in peace, for you would never know if God was satisfied with what you have done in your life.

Thank God for raising up Martin Luther and through him and others, reforming the Church—for today you are hearing the truth that Jesus Christ has done all things for you. “It is finished!” He cried from the cross. The sinner is justified. You are justified before

God. For Jesus' sake you are completely forgiven. Eternal life in heaven is yours now in Christ. There is nothing you must do. "If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed." You are free from the curse of your sins. You are free from the terrors of death and hell. You are not free to go out and live in disobedience, but you are free to live as God's forgiven child, having faith that He will never reject you on account of your disobedience, but that through Jesus, He always forgives you.

October 31 may mean costumes, candy, and fun for many, but for us it means that we thank God for having given us the truth of our salvation in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.