

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg chapel, inviting debate on the practice of selling indulgences for the forgiveness of sin. Today we celebrate that day as the Reformation of the Church. As Lutherans we regard this as being of such significance that we include a day in the liturgical calendar for its commemoration.

This Reformation we celebrate is critical and vital. It isn't a nostalgic pride that we feel as we remember the events of 492 years ago. Celebrating the Reformation is important because it points us to the wonderful and awesome things that God did to preserve his truth among us. The truth is that we, while living in this fallen world, are at the same time sinners and saints. We fail to live up to the law of God for our lives. However, through our baptism and faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, God's grace redeems us and embraces us as children of God - his saints.

The very heart of the Reformation that we celebrate today is this. We cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merit, works or satisfactions, but we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith.

When Martin Luther became a monk, he continued to struggle with the church. The concept of God as a stern judge who demanded righteousness and was so far removed from humanity that God could only be approached thru Mary or the saints gave little spiritual comfort to Martin. The more he tried to please God, the

more he realized he could not. In despair, he turned to the Bible. He read Romans 1:17 - "The righteous will live by faith" and Romans 3:28 "for we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

These words were a release from his anguish. He was freed from trying to do that which is impossible. He was freed from a sense of guilt, failure and freed from the terror of sin. With this new discovery, he tried to show the church its wrongs. Luther called the church to get back to the basics, the Word of God. God's word alone is the rule of faith.

Romans 3:21-24

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. 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.

Luther in his intense study of the Gospel gave us an understanding of a theology of divine redemption. The Gospel declares that the basic problem in creation is human sin. Jesus' death on the cross is God's solution to bring us into a right relationship with God. It calls us to repent as we embrace God's redeeming grace. In spite of my sinfulness, I receive the unmerited gift of God's redeeming grace. True righteousness comes only when I acknowledge my sinfulness and my need for grace, which comes only through faith.

When I am forgiven and accept Jesus as my savior, I become a new creation. I am transformed.

For most of my life I have been a regular attendee at church. I raised my children in the church as well. But I don't think I fully understood what being a Christian all was about. Church attendance alone did not keep me from making some seriously negative choices in my life. In the early 90's, I was asked by my pastor to become a Stephen's minister. Because all of my kids were out of the house and I was newly divorced, I believed it was a good time for me to become more involved. The training took almost a year. My first care receiver was a woman whose presenting problem was that her husband was an alcoholic. I worked intensely with her for almost two years, but her situation did not seem to be improving the way I thought it should. The situation was far more complex than I thought it was. In the meantime I began working with another young mother with a diagnosis of Crohn's disease.

As time went on, we discovered that she had been sexually abused as a child and was having disabling flash backs. Her disturbing history was affecting her physical well being as well as her mental health. Even though she was using birth control, she became pregnant with her 3 child. A month after her son was born, she discovered a lump in her breast. She had surgery, chemo therapy and radiation and hoped to be cancer free.

When she thought it was about time for her hair to fall out, we had a "head shaving" ceremony. Her husband, her children, her parents,

a few close friends and I gathered around her. We prayed, sang and share communion together. When we finished our worship time, her husband, with the help of an electric clippers began to shave her head. When we began our evening together, her face was drawn and tired looking. Each of us had an opportunity to take part by using the clippers. When her hair was completely gone and we had a chance to look at her, there was a radiance about her that we had not seen in a very long time. She appeared to glow with the Holy Spirit. It was a remarkable experience that I will never forget.

She gave a concert about 4 months before the cancer spread to her brain stem. She sang a song that has become very special to me. It was sung at my daughter's and my weddings and I talk about at funerals. It is called "This Day." 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ years after her initial diagnosis, Lynda died. I was beside myself with grief. How could an all powerful, loving God take this gifted mother, who loved God with all her heart and soul and being. My faith at that point in my life did not give me the answer nor much comfort. I was speechless on how to articulate how God worked in God's world.

My pastor tried to help but eventually he suggested that I look into the seminary for a better understanding of how God works in the world. During the time I attended the seminary, I also began listening to Christian radio. I can't give you a specific date, but somewhere along the line, I began a transformation. As a result, I have a peace that I can't explain. I have a gift of faith that no matter what happens to me or those I love, I am certain God will

be with me. I no longer need answers to the "why" questions. I can trust that God is in control of God's world. God knows all. God wants us to have a faith that trusts without needing to know why.

Without Luther's courage to reform the church and bring the Gospel to all people, I would not be a transformed follower of Christ. Christian faith begins with a personal relationship with Jesus; a relationship of love. We can live knowing that God, the Father, Jesus Christ the Savior and the Holy Spirit our redeemer, will meet our needs.

The Bible makes it clear that God the Creator is involved with & in all of creation: God directs, rules, intervenes, hears and answers prayer. God sent Jesus into the world to teach people how to love one another and to open blind eyes and deaf ears.

Our Gospel lesson today is an excellent example of God's work through Jesus. In this story, we can see many of the things which we might call the conditions of a miracle. There is the tenacious persistence of Bartimaeus. Nothing would stop his raucous cry to come face to face with Jesus. He was utterly determined to meet the one person whom he believed could understand his problem. This was not a sentimental wish to see Jesus. It was a desperate desire to be made whole.

His response to the call of Jesus was immediate. He ran like a shot out of a cannon. He knew precisely what he wanted - his sight! His

request was, "Jesus, let me see again." Jesus response was immediate. "Go, your faith has made you well." When we go to Jesus, if we are as desperate as Bartimaeus was, Jesus will respond. Bartimaeus had faith, not a clear cut theology of healing. No one will ever fully understand Jesus. Having received his sight, Bartimaeus followed Jesus. He began with a need, he was granted his sight, and he responded with gratitude and finished with loyalty. He became a disciple of Jesus. Bartimaeus is the first person in Mark's gospel who followed Jesus after Jesus acted on his behalf.

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind man which set him free to follow unconditionally. Luther opened the eyes of the Church of his time, translated the Bible into the German language so that the ordinary people could learn of God's freeing love through Jesus Christ.

We need to move forward in faith as a congregation as well as individuals, to be reformed and renewed. Will you open your heart to see God's grace and be set free by it? Reformed to be transformed.