

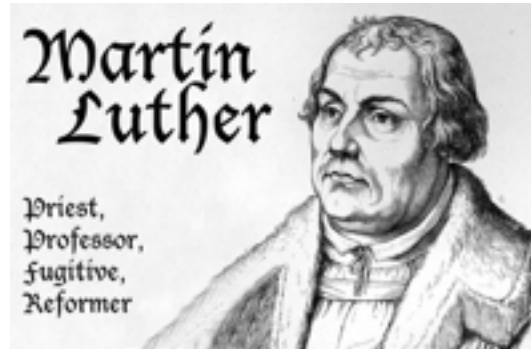
Luther's Legacy — The Gospel of Forgiveness

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday — October 25, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

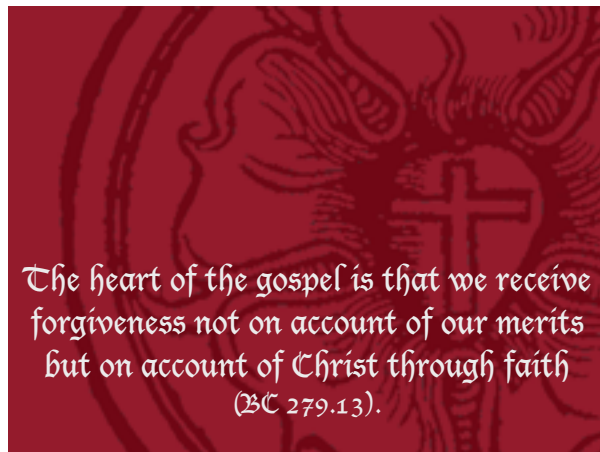
[SLIDE 27] We are stewards of the legacy of Martin Luther — the 16th century German priest, professor, fugitive, and reformer. That means we have a responsibility to not just preserve that legacy but to build on it appropriately. To do so, of course, we need to be able to recognize and assess his contributions to church and society. Luther translated the Bible and the mass into the common language of the people, wrote hymns (“A Mighty Fortress”), encouraged congregational singing, and urged everyone to receive Holy Communion weekly. His work in these areas effectively transformed worship from a spectator sport to a celebration in which everyone could participate. Luther encouraged the education of pastors and lay people, boys and girls alike by writing the Large and Small Catechisms and advocating for the establishment of public schools. He elevated marriage and family life as the highest of callings, encouraging fathers to take active roles in the care and raising of their children, and lifting up the status of women within the home and community, even breaking with social and legal customs of the time to bequeath to his wife, Katie, all his earthly possessions. In many ways Luther set the stage for social reforms that we take for granted today.



Luther's legacy is not all positive. How could it be? He was a man of his times, and as he himself would be the first to admit — a sinner. He wrote horrible things about the Jews of his time. Those writings were used by the Nazis to fuel anti-semitic propaganda and justify the genocide of European Jews during the second world war. Those writings have also been used by white supremacist groups in this nation to fuel anti-semitism. It is for this reason that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America formally repudiated Luther's anti-Judaic writings in 1994 as a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way the church that bears Luther's name has shown itself to be a reforming church that is not locked into slavishly repeating the mistakes of the past.

The very fact, however, that there is a church that bears Luther's name is ironic, an unintended and unwanted legacy of the priest and professor who sought to reform the holy, catholic and apostolic church of the 16th century. Which leaves us wondering: what then is the point of being a "Lutheran" church? Bishop Elizabeth Eaton addresses this question in her article in October edition of *The Lutheran* magazine, stating that what defines "Lutheran" is our theology, our very particular way of understanding the Jesus story. She says that if we were to ask family or friends what they must do to be in a right relationship with God, they are likely to talk about keeping the

commandments, being a better person, reading the Bible, and the like. To which the Lutheran response is, “No. The love of God at work in the crucified Christ creates this right relationship. Our part is to receive this gift in faith. . . . This is a shattering reversal of the way things have always worked. We don’t have a transactional relationship with God — if I do this then God will do that. It is a transformational relationship. We who were dead in sin have now been made alive.” Martin Marty calls this particular Lutheran understanding of Christ’s mission “The Gospel of Forgiveness.” **[STEP 1]**



Our Scripture readings for today are at the heart of our particular Lutheran way of understanding Christ’s mission in the world. In our Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus declaring, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” We wonder: what truth makes us free, and from what do we need to be made free. Jesus answers “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” St. Paul in his letter to the Romans declares that there is no distinction between people “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:22-23).

All have sinned. Everyone of us does things that we should not do. Intentionally and unintentionally, we say and do things that hurt, harm, or endanger others. Everyone one of us forgets, fumbles and fails to do the helpful, loving and kind things we ought to do. The result is a lot of brokenness, pain and sorrow in families, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, in communities, in countries, in the world. We are so deeply enmeshed in all these layers of brokenness that we cannot break free. The message of the Gospel is that God’s Son, Jesus Christ makes us free.

St. Paul describes the process of salvation and healing as being justified by God’s grace as a gift, that involves God passing over sins previously committed (Romans 3:23-25) . In our Old Testament lesson, God says, “I will forgive your iniquity and remember your sin no more” (Jeremiah 3:34).

At the heart of the good news is God’s decision to, not just pass over and forgive our sins, but to forget them, to erase even the memory of them. We call this grace. It is **how God** saves us, **how God** loves us, accepting us in spite of our brokenness because God is by definition gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. Grace means that there is nothing that you can do to stop God from loving you.

Faith is **how we** receive God’s gracious gift of forgiveness and the promise of new life in Christ. Faith is our response to God’s grace. It is part trust, part knowledge, part commitment. Our faith is built on the faith of Jesus whose trust, knowledge and commitment to God are demonstrated in his crucifixion and resurrection. Our faith emerges as confidence that we are truly God’s beloved

children, in our knowing who Christ is and what his teachings are, in our following Jesus' example, and our living and sharing of the gospel of forgiveness.

At stewards of Luther's legacy, we are called to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness to all who are trapped in fear, guilt, and shame. We are called to tell the world that there is no such thing as person who is unworthy of God's love, that there is no person on this planet who is outside the bounds of God's grace. We are called to invite all people to experience God's grace firsthand, at the font and at the table where in, with, under and through water, bread and wine Christ gives himself to us so that we are freed from slavery to the sins that entangle us. We are called to walk alongside one another forgiving and receiving forgiveness. As people forgiven and forgiving each day is a new start. The gospel of forgiveness means that that even as we are not held back by what we have been or done in the past, we do not need to fear what the future might bring. In this world and the next we belong to God. Amen.