

Many members. One body united in Christ.

The Festival of the Reformation (transferred)

Romans 3:19-28

25 October, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved in Christ and heirs of the Reformation,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's always fun getting together for our annual Reformation Celebration - good food, good music, fun games, and even a funny skit about the Reformation. But the Reformation was over 500 years ago. Does it really still matter? Is the Reformation still worth celebrating or can we just move on?

How you answer that question really depends on what you think the Reformation was. If it was about religious freedom or some disgruntled church nerds arguing about minutia that doesn't really matter or wanting to change the practices of the Roman Catholic Church for personal reasons then, no, the Reformation isn't even worth acknowledging let alone celebrating. And, unfortunately, that is how most people think of the Reformation which really only began on October 31, 1517. At that time, Dr. Luther himself was just beginning to understand the truth of what the Bible taught about salvation. He himself still held to some false teaching when he nailed up the 95 theses. Luther's call for debate regarding the doctrine of repentance and indulgences only just began to expose how far papal teaching had departed from Holy Scripture and how every aspect of the church had suffered as a consequence. It really wasn't until 1530 when the Augsburg Confession was prepared by our forefathers and presented to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg that the complete and faithful teaching of the Scriptures was brought back to full light.

The Reformation wasn't at all about things like religious freedom or theological semantics. It was the gracious work of God to pull the "righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:22) out of the deep and demonic darkness of works righteousness that had nearly completely swallowed it up. Through such atrocities as the buying and selling of indulgences and private masses for the forgiveness of sins, praying to the departed saints for help instead of to Christ, the withholding of Christ's Blood from His people, the idea that the pope was the Vicar of Christ on earth and therefore had the sole and unchecked authority to interpret God's Word, people were wrongly being taught to put their faith in things other than Jesus. These are direct assaults on Christ's own

word which we heard again today “If the Son sets you free, truly you will be free.” (John 8:36)

The Son of God humbled Himself by wrapping Himself in our flesh and offering that flesh as the atoning sacrifice for sin, ALL sin, EVERY sin, YOUR sin, to free YOU from the eternal damnation your slavery to sin had earned you. You know this slavery. You are reminded of it every day as your sin-corrupted flesh betrays you into doing those things that God has told you in his Law are evil and into not doing those things He has told you are good. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) There are no exceptions. “All” means “all”. And that slavery to sin means that there isn’t anything any of us can do to free ourselves. We can’t produce good enough works to merit God’s love and favor and so escape the prison of death. The only way to satisfy the Law by the Law is to keep it - all of it perfectly. And that is exactly why Jesus DIDN’T say “If the Son finds the key and gives it to you so that you can work really hard to free yourself, then you will be free.” No. He said very clearly, “If the Son sets you free, truly you will be free.” Full stop.

That and nothing less is what the Reformation was about and why it is still important and worth celebrating. The false teaching of Luther’s day is still alive and well. Consciences that have come to recognize that they have fallen short of God’s glory precisely by their failure to do good works are still being robbed of the very comfort and certainty of salvation that our Lord hung upon the cross to obtain for them. Sure, people might hear about what people did, but they are immediately discouraged from trusting in that and are instead pointed back to their own works and emotions and intentions and decisions to free them from God’s judgment and gain entrance to eternal life.

We observe this day of celebration because of the eternal import of the words of St. Paul “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:22) That IS the Christian faith - that all, the same all who have fallen short of God’s glory, are justified by God’s grace freely as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Or, as it is confessed in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.”

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And what is that but to confess the whole truth of those most precious words of Jesus which He spoke on the night when He was betrayed - "This cup is the new testament in My Blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus didn't say "For some of your sins" or "for your original sin." He said "Your sins." In other words, all of them - your original sin and your actual sin, the guilt you inherited from Adam and Eve AND the guilt of the sins which you yourself have committed since. Jesus Body and Blood paid for all of them - the sins you remember and confess and those you aren't even aware of. All of that sin has been covered by the righteousness of Christ in the waters of Holy Baptism. All of that sin is forgiven and you are restored to God as His absolution is proclaimed to you and as you feast on the sacrifice which was made on your behalf.

How wonderful, then, that today Alexander and Tabitha, making public their confession of this faith, will begin to eat the fruit of Christ's cross and receive all the benefits which Christ has promised come from it. And by this heavenly food they with us will be strengthened in faith toward Christ and in fervent love toward one another as they continue their study and instruction in God's Word. This is precisely why, parents, we are returning catechesis chiefly to the living rooms, the dining tables, and the bedsides of your homes, so that you may teach your children to know and believe in Christ and call upon Him from the moment they are conceived and bring them as soon as possible to eat from their Heavenly Father's table. It is our sacred duty as parents, a charge given by God Himself, to teach our children God's Word; to instill in them the habits of prayer and reading the Bible, attending the Divine Service and Sunday School, availing themselves of Christ's gift of individual confession and absolution, and living pious and faithful lives in their vocations because by Christ's Word they have come to know and be certain that Jesus, God's Son, has set them free. Here, together in our Father's house, we are strengthened and encouraged in the true faith. Here, Christ puts His Body and His Blood in our mouths so that we can say with absolute certainty "I am free because my Savior, Jesus Christ, has set me free. And He has sealed this promise to me by giving me to eat of His sacred Body and drink of His precious Blood."

Holy Communion is most certainly not a good work I do to please God. It is not just some empty symbolic ritual that makes me think of Jesus. It is His true Body and Blood, under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself, which impart to you the full and free forgiveness of all your sins, just as Jesus Himself has promised. Every Divine Service is a celebration of the Reformation because the Reformation was always and only about the free gift of salvation Jesus accomplished for us through His death and resurrection which He continues to proclaim

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to us in the preaching of His Word and the gifts of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

That, not Luther or Lutheranism, is what the Reformation was and still is all about. That is why we still celebrate and give thanks to God. Because, in truth, the Reformation is still ongoing. The devil has never and will never cease to infiltrate Christ's Church and corrupt the gifts of Christ so that the one true faith is obscured and sinners don't take or find refuge under the outspread arms of Christ crucified for them.

That is why we ought to prepare ourselves and our children as we gather each Lord's Day. Read the appointed readings (which you can find in Faith in the Word or your hymnals in the front on Roman number pages twenty through twenty-three) and discuss them together so you can better hear them. Examine your lives in light of the Ten Commandments and teach your children how to do the same. Confess your sins and receive Christ's absolution from your pastor. Read through "Christian Questions with Their Answers" on page 329 of the hymnal to help stir up a hunger and thirst for the Sacrament. Pray that God would grant you His Holy Spirit so that you might come to His house and His table in true repentance and faith. Reconcile with your neighbor. Pray for Christ ministers. After church and Sunday School talk about what you heard. Take a copy of the sermon home. Use the Sunday School review sheets to help cement the day's lesson in your children's hearts and minds. By these things God has promised that the great blessings of the freedom which is yours in Christ will fill you with the utmost comfort and strength against those who seek to enslave you to sin all over again and rob you of Christ's peace.

Redeemed of the Lord, you have been set free, completely free by the Son, God's Son. Not free to sin, but free to rest in His mercy, free from the vain and hopeless task of saving yourself or making yourself acceptable to God by your own works and efforts. You are wholly acceptable to God through Christ. He has declared it to be so. It is His Word. It is His truth in which if you abide, if you cling to, you will remain now and forever free. Do not let anyone rob you of this freedom and drive you back into slavery. Confess it boldly and joyfully with Luther and Melancthon and Chemnitz and Alexander and Tabi and with all the faithful before kings and friends and family and coworkers and enemies. Make it known to them that they too may learn the fear of the Lord and take refuge in His Christ and with us boast in the Lord, continually pouring forth His praise from our mouths.

A blessed celebration of the Reformation to all of you.

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In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.