

## ***Proud to be a Lutheran?***

When people find out that I'm a Lutheran pastor – they often tell me that they used to be a Lutheran, have a relative that is Lutheran – or that they appreciate Luther's writing and hymns. It seems as if Martin Luther is an influencer.

I'm convinced that most people don't really know Martin Luther – including Lutherans. The Luther who wanted paintings and statutes that teach the Scriptures – who celebrated the Lord's Supper every Sunday and practiced Private Confession & Absolution – who was prone to bouts of depression – who entertained friends and enemies alike – who said things that rub us the wrong way – who loved his beer.

Luther was massively productive! He wrote hymns, preached three different sermons every Sunday, lectured every day at the university – and the 78 volumes of his writings in English are only a fraction of what he wrote and preached.

Ironically, what made Luther tick, was the doctrine of justification – that man is saved by grace, through faith alone, apart from works. As one who had accomplished so much – a justification by works would have suited him just fine.

But it is this teaching – that man cannot contribute to his salvation – that gave him courage to stand up against enormous odds – and at the same time, set him free.

This doctrine attracts us because salvation is freely given to all – but it repels us because it forces us to say that our works, our religiosity and morality, are worthless.

Each year, the celebration of the Reformation causes a dilemma. On the one hand, we like what Luther says about Jesus Christ and the Gospel – but on the other hand, given other things he has said, we might prefer someone else for a dinner guest.

But the bottom line with Luther is that – unless he was convinced by the Word of God, he would not change his mind that a man is justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Speaking of FAITH – we need to speak of it the way the Bible speaks of FAITH. People say, “I have faith” – meaning they are confident that things will get better. Even non-Christians say they “have faith” – and encouragement and confidence are important, especially in difficult times – but that kind of faith often has nothing to do with Christ.

When the Bible says that man becomes righteous before God by FAITH – that means he relies on God for everything – in this life, and the life to come. FAITH means that we count ourselves as nothing – and what God has done in Jesus Christ is everything! FAITH looks not to self, but to Christ, and says – “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

FAITH gives shape to our lives, but strangely, it is never anything we do. It’s not a thing – a quantity to be measured – a personal decision to accept Christ. No, FAITH is God filling my emptiness with Christ. FAITH belongs to me, but it is always the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is valued – not by what it is, but what it believes ... in Christ Jesus.

When FAITH looks to itself it is weakened. Peter looked away from Christ and to himself and the waves – and began to sink. FAITH is only as good as its object. And whether you have a “strong” or “weak” faith – you have all of Christ, and not just a part of Him. And whoever has Christ, has God Himself.

Rather than a weak or strong faith, the real difference is between a right faith and a wrong (or false) faith. The First Commandment is given because we DO have other gods that we “fear, love, and trust.” Success, pleasure, accumulation of wealth or knowledge – addictions that run our lives – all kinds of things we look to for good. All false gods are frail, and deadly – because they threaten to replace Christ.

Luther wrote: “Take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.” If a person has everything – but does not have Christ – he has absolutely nothing.

Jesus said: “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” If even the poorest person (humanly speaking) has Christ – he has everything.

Biblical FAITH also means believing everything that Christ has taught. It is an abuse of the Reformation, and the Gospel, to think that the believer has the freedom to decide what he is going to believe.

When we as Lutherans speak of THE FAITH – we mean the faith proclaimed by Christ, handed down to the apostles, written in Holy Scripture, confessed in the Creeds, and taught by the Church down through the ages. This is the FAITH of which Jesus speaks when He says: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

This FAITH leads us to love our neighbor. Jesus, like the Father, embraced all people without discrimination – even those the world rejects. Our FAITH demands no less – and that’s not easy – because there are a lot of people who do not deserve our love. And yet, God loves them – not in theory – but in truth.

The offense of the Gospel is that Jesus became a sinner for the sake of sinners. “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we could become the righteousness of God in Him.” Since God loved us while we were yet sinners, so we are called to love our enemies, those who sin against us, our neighbor – to love them in word and deed.

And finally, the Christian FAITH is one that gathers with other Christians. There is no solo, or independent Christians. We gather around Christ where He promises to be – and receive His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation that He delivers through His Word and Sacraments.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, consider our Lord Jesus Christ – who humbled Himself for your salvation – and this very day, by His Gospel, exalts you the lowly sinner, to be a child of God, by FAITH.

*Sola Deo Gloria* – to God alone be the glory. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.