

Reformation Sunday 2017
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Kellers Church
October 29, 2017

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free,” Jesus said.

What is truth? And what truth could possibly set us free?

It depends on what we are slaves to.

Martin Luther [hold up photo of MLKing, Jr] – no. Martin Luther [hold up picture of Martin Luther] – yes. Martin Luther was a good monk. He prayed. He worshipped numerous times each day. He studied his Bible. He confessed his sins. A lot. He hit himself with a rope, to show his sorrow for his sins. Luther believed thoroughly that he was a worthless sinner and did not deserve God's mercy. He was a slave to his sin. Sin ruled his life. He tried to make up for his sins, to do good works, to be a good monk – but no matter how many good things he did, he felt they weren't enough for God. Then, as he was reading St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, Luther realized he no longer had to worry that he wasn't keeping God's laws. He read the words, “No human being will be made right in God's sight by deeds required by the law.” So Luther's doing the deeds required by the law did not make a difference. His being good and trying to impress God didn't matter. St. Paul's letter to the Romans goes on to say that the point of the law is to give us knowledge of our sin. Luther knew well that he was a sinner; the law had definitely taught him that. Then the letter to the Romans continues, “Now, apart from law, there is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.” All who have sinned are justified by God's grace as a gift. God's grace is a gift. Given now. Not later. Not after years in purgatory. Not after someone pays money or does a lot of good works to make up for your sins. God's grace is a gift. It is given through faith, through trust in Jesus.

Luther quit hitting himself with the rope. He still prayed and he still studied the Bible. And he still knew himself to be a worthless sinner not deserving of God's mercy. But he realized that even though he was a worthless sinner not deserving of God's mercy, God nevertheless had mercy on him. God loved him. God forgave him. Completely. It was a gift. He had felt that he was a slave to his sin. But the Son set him free. The son of God, Jesus, set Luther free from his slavery to sin.

So are we all, set free from our slavery to sin. We are set free from our slavery to the law. Let me make this as clear as a Lutheran pastor can: you do not have to do anything to earn God's love. You do not have to do anything to earn your salvation.

Obey the 10 Commandments? You don't have to obey.

Obey the laws of Leviticus on what is acceptable to eat? You don't have to obey those. You don't have to keep kosher.

Punish yourself for not being good enough? You do not have to.

You are free. The Son has made you free. You have God's grace as a gift.

So, since we are set free from our slavery to sin, now what? We don't have to obey the law to get on God's good side. We don't have to do anything to please God. We can sin all we want. It is sweet to be a Lutheran!

Which is not to say, that when we sin, everything is fine. It's not. There are natural consequences of sin. When we sin, we are not in danger of God punishing us in hell eternally. If we lie or steal or betray someone, we will have to deal with the natural consequences of people not trusting us. And, perhaps, jail. Or execution. As well as the natural consequences of others knowing we are untrustworthy. Of knowing ourselves to be untrustworthy. That kind of self-knowledge is never pleasant – yet when we face the truth of our sinfulness, we are no longer slaves to a perfect self-image that never existed.

Because, after all, even when we do good works, we sin. We do good works for the recognition. We do good works so we look good. Sometimes when we do good works we feel pretty proud of ourselves. SIN! There have been times in my life that I have done things that appear to be good on the surface, but really I was setting someone else up to look like a jerk. That is sin – no matter how good whatever I did was. Every sin shows the depth of our rebellion against God.

But Luther, who knew sin so very well, also knew God's grace. Grace means love that is undeserved. We don't deserve to be made free. We deserve to suffer the consequences for our wrongdoing. But the Son has set us free. We are no longer slaves, but part of the family. Part of the household. We are secure because we are loved by God. In the reading from Jeremiah, the old covenant that God referred to was the covenant that God made with the Israelites when they were newly freed from slavery to Pharaoh. The old covenant was the law that said, "Do this. Don't do that." With Jesus there is a new covenant, a new promise. Written not on stone tablets, but written on our hearts. The old law has been replaced with a new law: a law of love. Undeserved love – but love given, nevertheless. Luther remarked about the difference between law and gospel in this way: The law says, "do this" and it is never done; the gospel, the good news, says, "Trust God" and it is already done. [Heidelberg Disputation] It is this good news that has made a difference in the lives of Christians throughout the world in the 500 years since the Reformation began.

We can trust God. It is already done. Our salvation is in the hands of God, who loves us. No matter what. Thanks be to God! Amen