

**REFORMATION SUNDAY Grace Lutheran Church  
SERMON for Oct. 29, 2023 by Rev. Jim Hill**

**"Martin Luther, a Real Freedom-fighter": based on Romans 3: 19-28**

The Hamas in Gaza and the Hezbollah in Lebanon think of themselves as freedom-fighters because they want to “liberate” certain territories from the Israelis. The Israeli government calls them “terrorists”.

Some of the anti-vaccination groups in Canada and the U.S. thought of themselves as freedom-fighters, but most people thought they were rebels and law-breakers. Such so-called “freedom-fighters” justify the hurt they cause by calling it “collateral damage” in their struggle for a “higher good”.

There’s not much “freedom-fighting” in Canada, because the freedoms we have here are amazing! We have freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, freedom to vote for our government leaders, freedom to assemble and protest, and so on. These freedoms are such a great blessing that we should thank God for them every day.

But lately we are seeing a serious problem in many free countries. More and more citizens are abusing their freedom. There is increasing lawlessness and disregard for basic morality, and when that happens, freedoms are soon lost.

In Martin Luther’s time there were few of the freedoms that we enjoy today. In the early 1500s, Luther and many of his immediate forebears had to fight hard for freedom of thought and freedom expression of their views, because in those days the Roman Catholic Church (which was the **only** church) was an extremely repressive institution. And the RCC had great political power as well, with the church and state in such a tight alliance. The leaders of the church were often also leaders of the state. Also, in those days, only the elite nobility could read and write, so the Roman Catholic Church was able to direct and control what the uneducated masses believed.

When Martin Luther became a monk, he realized this, and became an ardent freedom-fighter. He translated the Bible into the German language, for he knew that Germans should be free to read the word of God for themselves. Luther and his compatriots also worked hard to set up a school system where everyone could learn to read and write and get an education, especially children. All these things were fiercely resisted by the church because the church leaders realized that the peasants and the illiterate priests would be able to determine for themselves whether what the leaders were telling them was true or not.

Luther was a freedom-fighter in several other ways also. And all of this grew out of the personal, spiritual freedom that Luther had found through his faith – his new-found, biblical faith.

Like most other Christians in the Middle Ages, Luther was in bondage to his own fears and compulsions. Like most others in his day, Luther believed in all kinds of ghosts and gremlins and devils and Halloween-type creatures, and he feared that God would punish him if he weren't holy enough. He believed what the church had taught him: that the more good works he did, the more he would please God. He was caught up in what he called "works-righteousness", which caused him waves of guilt and self-hate.

So, when he first went into the monastery, he was more conscientious in prayer and fasting and self-sacrifice than the other monks. Plus, he was obsessive/compulsive and worked harder at being good than anyone else.

I'm sure that works-righteousness is still the thinking among many Christians today: that if you work hard and live a virtuous life, God will bless you in this life and you'll be rewarded with heaven after you die.

This is what Luther believed at first, and he worked very, very hard at being good. He kept the commandments very carefully and did many good deeds. But no matter how hard he tried, Luther could not get rid of his guilt and his anxiety and fear that he had not enough, that God was still displeased with him, and therefore he would not be allowed into heaven after he died. (And,

by the way, life after death was what most people in those days dearly hoped for, because their earthly life was so miserable.)

So, no matter how righteous and upright and “recht” Luther was, he had no peace of mind. He was in bondage to an unhealthy fear of God.

Eventually, however, through his study of the Bible, Luther realized that: “Hey, I’ve been wrong!” There were two Bible passages in particular that woke him up to the truth. One was from Romans 3, and the other was Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, which says: “By grace you have been saved, through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not the result of works...”

Well! When Luther discovered that salvation is free, and forgiveness is free, and eternal life is a free gift, his mind and heart and spirit just overflowed with joy! Luther realized that there was nothing he or anyone could do to earn or merit salvation. God’s Son Jesus already earned it for us, through his life, death and resurrection. Luther realized he didn’t have to do anything to justify himself or earn God’s favour. He already had it as a gift!

So, Luther started to preach the Bible: the truth that we are “justified by faith” alone, without the works of the law. All we need to do is believe and accept the biblical truth that Christ’s righteousness is God’s gift to us. So, Luther’s great discovery set him free - free in mind and heart and conscience. And he began to preach and teach this Gospel, this good news, that all believers are saved by simple faith—by our trust in God’s mercy and not by any good works that one may do. Any good works that we do should be done out of thanksgiving alone.

The more Luther studied the Bible, the more clearly this Gospel message came through. He discovered this Gospel even in the Old Testament, namely the affirmation that “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”.

From that point on, there were four great Reformation truths that informed everything Luther spoke or wrote or did: *solus Christus* (Christ alone); *sola gratia* (grace alone); *sola fide* (faith alone); and *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). For the rest of his life, Luther proclaimed that our salvation is based on Christ alone, by God's grace alone, through faith alone, and our highest authority is Scripture alone.

This Gospel was the basis for Luther's freedom. Luther loved to quote St. Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, because it says things like: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (*Galatians 5:1*)

We could say, that from this time on, Luther became a freedom-fighter! It's no surprise that Luther was bitterly attacked over this, and it's a miracle that he avoided being burned at the stake, as so many reformers before him had been!

It was a miracle of God that Luther survived, and inspired other reformers who came after him: men like Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, Thomas Cranmer, William Tyndale, and others. And it's worth noting that all of these people were well educated, and they promoted education.

Jesus said that "the truth will set you free". Of course, Jesus meant his truth would set us free. But it applies generally, too. And that's why so many church denominations which came into existence since the Reformation have emphasized education, especially Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

In Germany and throughout Europe the Christian church established many schools for children and universities for grown-ups. This became a model for the whole world (at least in free countries). So, we could say that all educators are freedom-fighters.

Also, peace activists are freedom-fighters, or we might call them "freedom-keepers", because, without peace, there can be no freedom. And we've been seeing on the news lately, how many countries are turning from peace to war,

and you know, wherever there's war, freedom is lost. Even in the U.S. and Canada, more and more government leaders are in conflict with each other, sometimes bitter conflict. This slows down and sometimes stops the work of government, so citizens end up rebelling against the government.

My friends, without peace there is no freedom. When you see marches for freedom that turn violent, they are self-defeating.

That's why one of the most outstanding freedom-fighters in recent history was Martin Luther King, Jr., who fought for the civil rights for people of colour. He and his supporters showed that you can be non-violent and still fight successfully for freedom.

I say again: peace is essential for freedom.

But it's always difficult to achieve peace. Peace must begin on a personal level, as we learn how to handle our own inward conflicts. If not, then inward conflicts lead to family conflicts and conflicts in the wider community, in the city, the province and so on. So, it shouldn't surprise anybody that peace is difficult to achieve on a national and international level.

Regarding individual, personal peace – peace of mind and spirit – the church can help people with that. But the church has not been popular lately, nor is religion in general. I believe that peace must start from within, from knowing God loved us before we could love him back, and that God still loves us, unconditionally. This is the main message that Martin Luther taught and promoted.

Luther learned from experience what a wonderful peace of mind comes from knowing that God loves us; and what a wonderful peace of mind comes from our faith that God proved his love through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. There's wonderful peace of mind in knowing that God will never stop loving us, no matter what trouble or conflict we might go through, no matter what battles we may fight. Whether we're winning or losing, living or dying, we will win in the end.

Jesus said, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” We have salvation here in this life, and afterward in the next life. This means we are free, free to “live free” and to work for freedom in whatever way God directs us.

All the while, we look forward to that ultimate freedom of life with God on the other side of death, in the resurrection that God has waiting for us.

So, on this Reformation festival day, let us celebrate Luther’s discovery of this priceless Gospel of freedom, and let us be joyful and thankful for this wonderful Gospel.

Let me close with the words of an old song called “The Eagle and Me,” from a Broadway musical that was written in 1944 when World War 2 was raging:

*River it likes to flow  
 Eagle it likes to fly  
 Eagle it likes to feel it’s wings against the sky  
 Possum it likes to run  
 Ivy it likes to climb  
 Bird in the tree and bumblebee like freedom in autumn or summertime.  
 Ever since the day when the world was an onion  
 It was natural for the spirit to soar and to play...  
 The way the Lord wanted it!  
 Free as the sun is free  
 That’s how it’s got to be  
 Whatever is right for the bumblebee, and the river and the eagle,  
     is right for me.  
 We’ve got to be free  
 We’ve got to be free  
 We’ve got to be free . . .  
 The eagle and me!*

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS FOR REFORMATION DAY -- October 29, 2023**

Trusting in the transformative power of God's loving Spirit, let us pray for the whole people of God, the church, all of creation, and for all people in need.

Dear God, our Creator, we thank You for the enduring presence and witness of the Christian church throughout the ages. Bless all the congregations of the Church catholic around the world. We pray for the reformation of the church in our present times that it would continue to be a beacon of hope, where belonging and community mean that all are welcome, and where forgiveness and grace are found.

Gracious God, heal the church's many divisions, bring understanding and peace where there has been contention and strife, and unite us in one body through the love of Christ. Bless Pope Francis during these dangerous times, as he promotes peace between priests and parishes, churches and political leaders, and inter-religious harmony. Bless him and all bishops, pastors, diaconal ministers, teachers, administrators, and all the leaders and servants of the church, and strengthen them for the work of reconciliation and peace-making, in furthering your mission of love.

O God of justice and peace, we pray for peace for the people of Israel and Gaza. As they experience the destruction of their homes, and communities we pray that you would make possible the safe delivery of food, water and other sources of aid to these regions. May the desire for peace outweigh the short-term political gains claimed by both sides of this ongoing struggle of power and control over lands and people.

O Holy Spirit, as You have called, gathered, enlightened and strengthened Your children in the past, we pray that You continue to call and gather to Yourself people in need of forgiveness, anxious ones in need of peace, vulnerable and impressionable ones in need of spiritual strength, lonely and forgotten ones in need of community, and weary and overwhelmed ones in need of Good News. Pour out your love upon us.

O God of truth, we thank you for the legacy of Martin Luther, especially his emphasis on the love, forgiveness, grace and peace that your Son Jesus Christ brought us. Help us to hold fast to Your word of truth, as he did, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Your Good News of freedom and peace that are found in Holy Scriptures. Your living Word continues to be the transformative power to draw us near, that invites us to listen to your call to follow and join you in your ongoing work of bringing reconciliation, peace, and justice into the world. Open our hearts and renew us in Jesus' love,

O Lord of the church, we pray that You would bless the Lutheran Churches in Canada and on Vancouver Island. Today we pray especially for the congregations of our BC Synod, and their pastors and leaders. Bless those gathering for 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul's Lutheran in Maple Ridge; and the retirement of Pastor David Hunter at Peace in Vernon. Bless our Bishop Kathy Martin and our Synod Council. We pray that you would bless the churches in our city, and especially our congregation. Give to each of us wisdom and patience and perseverance during these uncertain times.

Finally, dear God, bless those relatives and friends who need Your presence and help this day. These we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts... We pray for hope and faith in your healing power for those who are ill or suffering in any way. Give them relief from their suffering and comfort them with your presence. We pray for a smooth passage for those who are dying. Bless their caregivers with tender compassion and peace. And we pray for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones. Give them confidence and the hope of resurrection and healing.

Into Your care, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your power and love. **Amen.**