

## REFORMATION SUNDAY | OCTOBER 29, 2023

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 46 | ROMANS 3:19-28 | JOHN 8:31-36

There's an old joke about a woman who met St. Peter at the pearly gates. "Before you get settled in," St. Peter said, "Let me introduce you to your new neighbors." The two walked by a big cathedral covered in stained glass. St. Peter gestured up and said, "These are the Episcopalians." "That's great," the woman replied. Next they came up to a big tent. St. Peter gestured at the meeting and said, "These are the Methodists." "Oh, yes. Some of my friends were Methodists," the woman added. Finally, they came up to a big brick wall that, coincidentally, looked an awful lot like the front of our church, and you could hear a muffled Bach prelude coming from inside. Lowering his voice to a whisper, St. Peter said, "Now we need to be quiet, but these are the Lutherans." The woman raised an eyebrow and said, "Why do we have to whisper around them?" To which St. Peter replied, "Because they think they're the only ones here."

At its best, Reformation Day is a chance to reflect on the central insight of the Lutheran Reformation, God's freely given gift of grace. But sometimes it can feel a little more like the punchline of the joke. A day when we throw a pep rally for ourselves while the rest of the world has moved on to other things.

There are a few reasons that Reformation Day lands a little bit funny these days. For one, people relate to churches differently than they used to. Some of us are here because we went to ELCA.org or reconcilingworks.org, plugged in our zip code, and said, "Looks like I'm going to Advent Lutheran Church." But an increasing number of us are here because of a connection to local mission. As a result, our Lutheran church is made up of people who identify as Episcopalian and Catholic and Methodist or maybe some combination or maybe even no label at all.

Another change is that the central controversies at play in the Reformation are no longer really at issue.<sup>1</sup> Of course, we have differences with the Catholic Church on various issues.<sup>2</sup> But it's not as if Fr. Stephen is selling indulgences after mass in the parking lot.

One more—this is the one we want to get into—the language that the reformers used to talk about God is increasingly outdated. Those of you who have done adult education with me on the medieval church know they use words like righteousness, Good Works, stations of life, and the inner man. Fine and good, except no one actually talks like this anymore.

So I want us to do a little bit of translating today between scripture, the Reformation, and our current context. And we're going to do it by focusing on one sentence from one reading, today's reading from Romans. St. Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in

---

<sup>1</sup> 2015's "Declaration on the Way" uses the language of disagreements no longer being "church-dividing." Most of the ecumenical work seems to be on finding a way to celebrate the Eucharist together.

<sup>2</sup> These includes doctrinal issues such as the ordination of women as well as social issues such as birth control.

**ADVENT** LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481  
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

Christ Jesus.” Justification is core issue at play in the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> It is also one of those “church words.”

One way to understand justification is to think about, of all things, Microsoft Word. When you put in text, you need to decide how to justify it, how to line it up. Justify left, justify right, etc. When St. Paul says that we’ve been justified, what he means is that we’ve been brought into alignment with God. God is over here. We were over here doing God knows what. And Jesus has brought us back into alignment with God. We are now justified. It’s a bit mechanical, but you get the idea.

But there’s another way you can think about justification, too. And this is the one that I think has a lot more import for our current context. Imagine that you’re a senior in high school, and you want to go to a particular college. You can’t just show up on the first day of classes. You need to apply. You need to put together a whole package of information about your grades and your activities. You need other people to write letters about you. And you need to write a personal essay about some completely inane prompt. If you want to be accepted, you need to justify your place. To make an argument for it.

This kind of justifying isn’t just for teenagers, of course. Maybe you want a promotion. You justify the pay raise by compiling a bunch of evidence of how good you are at your job. Maybe you want a new romantic partner. So you set up an online dating profile with evidence of how wonderful you are to spend time with. Just this month, I was talking with someone who was trying to move into an assisted living facility. And sure enough, they had to apply to get in. Hopefully there was no personal essay.

At first glance, justification seems like an archaic term that no one uses anymore. But it’s what we spend a lot of our lives doing. Gathering evidence. Trying to get someone’s attention. Striving to be accepted and affirmed by those around us.

So it can be tempting to take that kind of relationship and say, *This must be the way I relate to God*. I need to be a certain kind of person. I need to do certain types of things. I need to perform these certain rituals. And if I do all that, maybe I can be worthy of love or be accepted or be in relationship with God. Maybe I can justify my relationship with God.

If you read Luther’s writings from before the Reformation, this was the predicament he found himself in.<sup>4</sup> The religious worldview that he was a part of said that God was an angry authority figure who demanded impossible devotion from people. And when people inevitably fell short, they were punished. And as a result, Luther’s relationship with God was not one of faith. It was one of fear.

And it’s not a coincidence that during that period in Luther’s life, he sounds like a kid worried about his college application isn’t good enough to get him accepted. He puts in all this time and effort, but then fears that it’s not enough. And so he gets stuck in this cycle of trying to justify himself to God, worrying that he’s falling short, and being thrown back on his own efforts to try even harder.

---

<sup>3</sup> See “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” “The doctrine of justification was of central importance for the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was held to be the ‘first and chief article’ and at the same time the ‘ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines.’”

<sup>4</sup> There’s a good treatment of this in Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Yale University Press, 2006), 179.

What got him out of it was one of his mentors who pointed him back to St. Paul in the book of Romans. “[We] are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift.” Justification is not something that we achieve for ourselves out of our own resources and our own efforts. It’s something that’s given to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, my relationship with God isn’t the goal that I strive for. It’s the foundation that makes Christian life possible.

So my relationship with God is not like my relationship with a manager or an admissions counselor or a romantic partner where I need to constantly come up with new things to keep them around and interested in me. My relationship with God is not something I achieve. It’s something that’s given to me through the resurrection of Christ. And it’s given to me not because of what I do but because of who God is.

I’m always amazed how deeply that news resonates with people. Just this summer, I was chatting with a woman, maybe in her fifties or so, who hadn’t been involved with a church in a long time and was curious what a Lutheran church is like. And so I just told her the same thing Paul talks about. God’s love isn’t something we earn, God’s grace is a gift given to all of us without condition or exception. And she got kind of quiet for a second, you could kind of see her thinking, and she said, “I wish I’d had a church like that when I was a kid.”

It breaks your heart and puts it back together again. That in a world of so much justifying, of so much striving to be loved, trying to be affirmed, striving for recognition, the love of God in Christ Jesus is always available to us. Freely given to each of us to live in. And freely given for us to share.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor