

2007-10-28 Jer. 31:31-34, Ps. 46. Rms 3.19-28, JN 8:31-36 Grace and Peace be yours from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

While attending seminary I had to come up with some pretty creative ways to remember things... memory is always a challenge. I developed what I called bed sheets...pieces of white paper taped together and formed into a grid so that I could compare each theologian, church, historical time and place using symbols. For the Roman Catholic Church there was no salvation outside the church. One must remain right with God, ie the church, at all times. One did this by getting Baptized immediately after birth, going to confession at least once a week, going to communion, saying one's prayers, and if fallen from a state of grace purchasing a ticket into heaven called an indulgence. There was no direct path to God because miserable sinners cannot go near God. There was the church—the priest—to mediate the way, to do endless masses on behalf of those who died so that their time in purgatory would be shorter. It was far better to be celibate and able to maintain the rigors of the life of faith than to have to worry about others or try to maintain a family. It was best to have no real friends and devote oneself entirely to God. The Church was the kingdom of God.

Enter Martin Luther: the consummate Christian...celibate, faithful, studious...a man living on his knees, a man prostrated before the

altar. If I am so good why do I feel so awful? Luther worked the program. You have to give him high marks. But for Luther the program didn't work. He was still a miserable sinner. The practice of religion did not deliver salvation.

Most clergy of his day did not have or read the Bible...but Luther became a scholar and with training in the scriptures discovered something that had gotten lost. "Since 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 Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." In other words we are saved by what God did through Jesus, not by personal actions, beliefs or membership in the church, nor any other construct or discipline made by humans. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast." Eph. 2. 8-9.

Through this small beginning Luther forever changed the world. He changed the way we live, the model of spiritual life, and the structure of the church. It took 4 years for Luther to be totally separated from the Roman Catholic Church. But The Reformation has lasted. WE are not only reformed but reforming. Each generation translates the faith into the vernacular.

*Into the language of the streets*

There are many daily rituals that I attribute directly to Luther. He believed that men and women and children should come together for the meal and talk and share of their day and of their experience and struggle with issues of faith. He believed that God made us to be together as families where we model the acceptance of God with each other and our children. He saw women not as the reason for the fall, but as partners in the Gospel. He put his own wife in charge of his household and even went to the extraordinary measure of making her full heir of his estate. He believed that sexual expression was a gift from God to be enjoyed—not just for the procreation of children.

He believed and lived the belief that God made us for freedom ...freedom to think, to disagree, to read scripture and comment on it (whether we are educated in it or not), freedom to love, to sacrifice, to change our mind and to grow day by day in faith as God leads us. He taught that Jesus was the measure...even scripture must come under the scrutiny of the life and action of Christ. Where scripture seemed contradictory, he would ask, “What would Jesus do or say?” He taught that we are all priests in God’s kingdom, that is that no one is set apart over another and that obedience is the gift of the giver, not the demand from on high. Frankly, Luther turned the world upside down. He taught that it was appropriate to follow your conscience in matters of faith—

that no one could insist on a belief as mandatory for all. As he modeled passive resistance he showed the power of truth to be more effective than the sword. In effect, he lived God's grace and freedom. And most importantly he based all of it on the life of Christ and on scripture.

In his own time the church had become the gate keeper instead of the gate. Luther pointed out that no one had a right to be gate keeper, only God. Luther placed the process of reformation in the heart of the individual. Freedom is offered to all. Each person must wrestle with faith and the practice of faith. Luther was all about small group life as the place the spirit provides fermentation. His home was an ongoing meeting place for discussion. Luther made the wonderful renewing discovery that the church exists to be God's love and forgiveness in the world, to be Christ's body, to gather in the lost and homeless, to treasure all people as valued children of God and to pour out God's grace. Outrageous in his rhetoric—in his practice of faith, he was fearless in the proclamation of the gospel as he knew it. He was fresh air and new birth—God's call to grace and freedom.