

*Sermon for the Festival of the Reformation 2005 · Sunday, 30.x.2004, 10:00, Holy Eucharist – LBW 2
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36
Saint James Evangelical Lutheran Church / Brogue, Pennsylvania*

Jesu Juva! · O Jesus, Save!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*“Jesus answered them: ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone
who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not
have a permanent place in the household; the son has
a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free,
you will be free indeed.’”*

–John 8:34-38

If you are old enough, you will remember a television program of the 1950's, *The Millionaire*. In each episode, the representative of a person of vast wealth contacts an ordinary man or woman. Unbeknownst to them, their ordinary lives have been observed by this extraordinary and unseen benefactor, John Beresford Tipton, who has, for reasons known only to him, decided to give each person a cashier's check for \$1,000,000. The reaction of each recipient is, first, utter disbelief. Disbelief then gives way to questioning, even after the bank accepts the

cashier's check as genuine. 'Why? Why did I receive this immense sum, not as a bequest, not as a loan from a friend or relative, but as a sheer gift from a complete stranger, from one who knows me but whom I may not know, not even to thank.' Then, as I recall, a spending spree usually follows, leading to depression as the question will not go away. Only when the recipient thinks of a way to use his or her fortune to make others or even one other person happy do they feel that the gift is truly theirs. It makes me wonder now who the theological consultant was on that series, for the basic plot could have been written by Martin Luther himself.

"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed!" This is the *family* of God. There is not a slave or a hireling or an outsider among us this morning. Even if you decided to come here on your own, perhaps having meant to for some time now, perhaps on an impulse or if you came here at the invitation of a friend, you have been called and gathered into the family of

God by the Holy Spirit at work in your life in ways you cannot begin to imagine.

If you have been baptized into the Name not only of the Son, who declares you free of all that binds you, but also in the Name of the Father of us all and of that good and Holy Spirit who brought you here, then you *know* your birthright through God's grace, your birthright as a free man or woman before God, no matter how others, your conscience or the devil himself may reproach you with your sins. And the whole Church stands witness to the fact that you *belong* here, that you are a living part of this family of faith forever. If you have not been baptized into Christ Who died and rose for you, so that you might know God's love and rise to a transcendent hope, this is the freedom to which God calls you. I offer that freedom to you in His Name, worth more than any cashier's check, and it is guaranteed not to bounce.

The Church of Jesus Christ, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, is your home, and the grace of God's forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation is your gift to keep and to use. 'But, is it really mine?' That question occurs to any child of Adam and Eve, through whom sin began by listening to the serpent's question, "Did God say . . . ?" 'Did Christ, the eldest Son of God's House and the Father's Heir, really mean that / am forgiven all my sins, all my debt to God, and that I have new life as a co-inheritor of God's promises through Him? What of my stubborn or fearful or lustful or angry heart? What of my memory of past offenses and, more, what of my memory of being offended? Am I really forgiven? Am I really now fully endowed with the gift of salvation?'

The Gospel says '*Yes!*' But from time to time, and very much so in Luther's day, some in the Church could not resist answering that question with the words, 'Yes, you are forgiven, just as long as' It is our instinct to attach a condition to a

gift, to think that it must somehow be earned or reciprocated. That is the understandable mistake, but for the believing soul the terrible and deadly error into which some Church teaching and practice fell five centuries ago, just as wrong-headed Christian thinking that does not pay attention to the Word of God could tomorrow, just as it does, just as we do. In either and all such cases, Reformation, the *re-formation* of our faith and life according to the teaching of Christ is in order, today as much as it was five hundred years ago.

Particularly if we receive God's gift—no less than the Father's gift to us of the only Son of His very self He would ever have!—*and do nothing with it*, just keeping it to ourselves, we are always going to wonder about how we stand before God, both now but especially at the hour of our death. We are always going to be susceptible to a vague and nagging doubt. 'Oh yes, I am baptized, confirmed and I commune as often as I can, but there is something in me that makes me wonder whether God

did not waste His precious grace on me for all the difference it seems to make in my life and in my life with others.'

No, the Holy Spirit did not give the Church the wrong address when the Good News of Jesus Christ was proclaimed to you. You *are* a free son, a free daughter of your Heavenly Father, but you will never *feel* like what you are, never truly *believe* in *who* you are by God's grace until you share that grace richly with others. For that, too, is what it is for, immense wealth of the heart and spirit to pass on in vessels of kindness to those whom *your* life can change as you deliver God's gift to others. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and who has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria! · To God Alone Be the
Glory!*



*Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternam!
The Word of God Endures Forever!*