

Sermon for the Sunday Festival of the Reformation, 28.x.2007
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Communion, ELW Setting 4
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

J. J.!

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

Almost six hundred years ago those who lived then in the
faith we profess now were faced with a new situation. The
Church, it seemed, had lost her way, had forgotten her
purpose and her mission in Christ as her center. A struggle
to right her, to set her back on course had ensued, like a
mutiny on board a great ocean going ship. Now, suddenly,
it seemed as though the captain were either lost overboard
or . . . who was the captain?! No one seemed to know. But
this they did know: The Church of Jesus Christ, then as

now, was not set afloat in a peaceful world that would wait for her to regain her equilibrium, to right herself and to come to rest in a safe anchorage. No, the world, then as now, was turbulent and evil seemed to gain the upper hand on every side. What was worse, it looked as though the Church and Christians with her would smash to pieces on the reefs of history with the Mohammedan Turks poised on the edges of Western Christendom, ready to gobble up the remains. And from those Christians so far back then a cry arose in just three sentences, sentence fragments, really, like shouts from a drowning mariner:

Sola Scriptura! = Only Scripture! Scripture alone!

Sola Gratia! = Only grace! Grace alone!

Sola Fide! = Only Faith! Faith alone!

Scripture alone! When one is drowning, or facing an imminent shipwreck, train wreck or *Church* wreck, that is

no time for fine distinctions and nuanced formulations, precisely because there *is* no time. There is time left for nothing but to pray, time left for nothing but to find where God is and to hold on to that for dear and everlasting life! That was the situation of our reforming, Lutheran forebears. Is ours any different? There appears to be not much difference from where I stand.

All I can do, and all you can do if we still truly want to be living members of Christ in His Church is to hold on to Christ speaking to us in that great, God-filled book, that family history of God's people Israel and of God's new people and new humanity in Jesus Christ, to return and immerse ourselves in the source and well-spring of our faith witnessed to and born over time and space in the Bible. All that is in our hearts and minds in this time of blank unknowing as we are confronted with a Christian

community about to come loose from its foundation, a community that we are, or at least used to be, as we look with bewilderment at church doors that no longer welcome or protect or even gracefully close because they have become unhinged by lies, hypocrisy and a gluttony of bitterness and the thirst for revenge that goes back decades. Now, *now* we had better cling to the words of Scripture *alone* because the words of our own mouths have dried and crumbled like the leaves of autumn. *There* is life and hope and a promise that was made forever and will be kept forever, in *God's Word*, and not in ours.

Grace alone! No substitute for making those hard decisions we as the image of God are created to make, no excuse for sloppy, thinking, cheap talk and doing as we please, *grace* is a word that should say to us that God's gift of forgiveness was and remains *God's* gift, and that it is for

us, for *you* and for *me*, not for someone else who needs it more than I do, because *no-one* needs it more than I do. ‘Grace alone,’ as that most central of Lutheran slogans, is a way of life *for me*, and it is *not* mine to prescribe for others who are hurt, damaged, outraged perhaps and who feel rejected, used up, tossed away and written off by *my* sin, by *my* failure to love them as the Father has forgiven me for the sake of His Son, by *my* failure to treat that brother or sister as a full member of the family of Christ. *Grace alone?* Yes! That is all we have when in our families, our marriages, our friendships or in God’s Church we are hell-bent on ripping ourselves to pieces. *Grace!* It’s over and *done*

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. . . but not for us, unless we *believe* it! ‘*Faith alone.*’ No slogan of the Reformation has been more

misused, stretched completely out of shape, effectively deformed so that out of the Reformation came yet another *de*-formation of the Church, especially among us Lutherans. This happened as soon as a measure of peace had come to the North German lands, peace that would be very temporary, as soon as the terror of defying what most people knew to be the *only* Church, people who now however had their own church, owned and operated by princes and town councils, the Catholic Church with most of its teeth pulled and not anything to fear after all. Martin Luther himself noticed this change before his death, faith transformed from the faith of the Apostles and Martyrs to the faith of butchers and merchants and town councilmen who weren't about to get themselves killed for any 'faith,' a faith that was *there*, over in the Church, for the women and the kiddies, but not a faith which has to be *done* in lives

of white-knuckled courage, *trust* in God's promise of eternal life in Christ in the midst of death all around. The Lutheran Church would receive her chastening in short order, and for over thirty horrific years of faith our safe American version of Christianity knows nothing about, but, for a while the average male Lutheran then did not even bother showing up for liturgy, let alone prepare himself to receive Christ his Lord in Word and Sacrament. It got so bad before the plague struck in Wittenberg that the Reformer even threatened to go on strike, and though he did not actually follow through with his threat, it is a consolation to know that one is not the first to let the idea cross one's mind.

Faith is not 'all that stuff the pastor's teach and go on about.' Christian faith is that very *hanging on* to God's Word and to the grace and mercy we hear in that Word if

we listen for it, if we look for Christ in the Bible, in the sermon and in the Sacrament. God stretches out His hand to us as we help one another, opens His mouth to us as His Word is proclaimed in His Church, holds out His arms to us to break our fall and to save us from what we are about to do to ourselves through the discipline of His believing community, and, greatest of all miracles, the Triune God imprints in our minds and hearts the instinct to come to Him by name from the instant of our Baptism, and probably even before in the heart and mind of every son or daughter of Eve.

I know that there is a tremendous reordering of our house of faith, a re-formation of this Congregation, if *this* Holy House is to continue, but there is nothing in that reordering more necessary than these three points on which our life together is based and around which the wheel of

our congregation must revolve if we are ever to get off *dead* center and move ahead where the Holy Spirit is calling us. Here are the means of Grace: *Scripture*, God speaking to the Church, and here is *Grace* itself, the mercy of God pronounced on all sinners who repent; and here is *Faith*, our inheritance from a far greater family than our own, by water and the Holy Spirit. Where are we? ✠
Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and 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.



S. D. G.!