Romans 3:19-28

As many of you know, the Reformation in the 16th century is a major historical event that really changed not only Germany, but also the rest of the world. Even if you are like me, who tried to avoid history classes as much as possible, you would still have taken at least 1 class and have heard of Martin Luther and the Reformation.

It is so significant that almost everybody, like the historians and some protestants, would claim this Reformation as part of their heritage. Some would see this as a religious reform that brought freedom to lay people. Some see this as worship reform to break away from old traditions and superstitions. Still others see this as a social reform that led to the separation of church and state, again, in order to gain more freedom from the dictatorship of the papacy. But were these the reasons for the Reformation? No doubt, there were reforms in the religious, worship, social aspect in Europe at that time, and whatever else historians can come up with, but were these what Luther and the other reformers had in mind when they started this movement? What was it really about? What was Luther's and his colleagues main concern? Was it social problems? Was it traditions and superstitions? Was it the papacy?

For Luther, it is all about the reformation of the man from the inside extending to the outside, from the inner being spreading outward to the whole person. Indeed, there were many religious, political, and social problems as it is still today, but all these things are made up of people and if the individual person does not change, then these others things cannot change. One needs to be reformed from the inside, starting with each one of us in the mind and in the heart.

Indeed, Luther nailed the 95 Theses because he saw something not right with the selling of indulgences. Money cannot buy the forgiveness of sins, money cannot buy one's way out of purgatory (which he still believed to exist at that time). His main problem was the abuse of indulgences, which people used as license for all kinds of wicked behavior. The 95 These argued that it is a better spiritual exercise to actually help the poor and needy than spending that money on a piece of paper with the pope's signature on it. He was still supportive of the papacy at that time, but it was a bit later when the pope ordered him to retract and deny his own writings that he took his stand for the sake of the pure gospel.

It is then the true nature of the Reformation comes to the fore, that there is nothing men can do, must do, should do, or actually need to do in order to gain God's mercy and/or grace. Indeed, Luther saw something very wrong with the church, particularly the abuse of the papacy, but ultimately the wrong lies within the human heart. He found that it is the heart that needed reform above all else. You too can look around you and find all sorts of wrong. Just this past Thursday in bible study we talked about people willfully not going to church regularly. Many people who are not in church can look at the church and see many wrongs. For the younger generations, they may say the church is boring (the traditional ones at least), and so they prefer doing something else on Sunday. Some avoid the church because they find a bunch of hypocrites pretending to be happy and sinless, or they are absent simply because they don’t like that one particular person in the church. There are indeed plenty of reasons for not going to church but are you changing anything or anyone by being absent?

Church is of course very boring, if you compare to all the other entertainments around you. Is the church established by God to entertain you, to keep you out of boredom? God has given us other stuff like TVs and computers for that purpose. If you find the church boring, then perhaps something is not right with you, not the church. Perhaps you still have not understood why the church is established, but more importantly, you still do not understand sin and its deadly consequences, and so you also need a reform from inside.

And those who call others hypocrites, are they not also hypocrites themselves? Didn’t Jesus command us all to love and submit to one another, even our enemies? Yet we think we have the freedom to choose who to love and not love. If you find hypocrites in the church, sinners who do not deserve your love, then perhaps you yourself should examine your own heart, it is you who first need a change of heart, a reform.

And I could go on talking about how wrong we have become, but it's easier to just let the word of God do its job. Just read Luther's Small Catechism on the 10 commandments and the explanations to refresh your memory, it's probably one of the worst self-help books you can find. With each commandment, your knowledge of your sin only increases, just as Paul says here in Romans 3:20. Luther was simply paraphrasing this (and other similar passages) when he says that we cannot by our own reasons or strength come to God (3rd article), because by works of the law no man is justified in God's sight, no one is good enough, no one does it right in any way. We need a reform, not for the church or the society, but it must first start with ourselves. Something must change, but how can we change? We all know that doing exercise is good for the body, but it's useless to say to the sick person that he needs exercise, or better yet, to say to a dead body that he needs to rise and walk. But this is exactly the condition of sin, it is death. This what Luther discovered reading the bible. No amount of indulgences and money, no amount of good works can get you any closer to God because we are dead in our trespasses (Eph2).

But there is one who can call life from death, who makes the sick walk, and who calls sinners friends, saints of the most high God. This is the great rediscovery of the Reformation, that not only we have no power to do anything good for God and so we fall under God's righteous condemnation, but that God actually has another kind of righteousness to save us from our misery. And so Paul here writes starting from verse 21 "but now", these two words have been called the "two biggest little words in the bible", for something have changed in real time, something happened in the history of mankind. "But now he righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law… the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rm3:22). This can also be translated as "the righteousness of God (the Father) through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ unto all who believe." It is because of Jesus' faithfulness that the righteousness of God is given as a gift to sinners who receive it through faith apart from the law. What then is Jesus' faithfulness? It is his bloody sacrifice on the cross. He was born under the law in order to redeem those under the law. He did not come to abolish the law but rather, he came in order to fulfill them in our place (Mt5:17). Therefore we are justified, declared righteous, counted as good, considered completely perfect apart from any works of the law ON OUR PART. This is the righteousness of God, which is totally contrary to reason.

The sinner must reform, one must change, but this is not something we can do. The good news is that God does it for us because this is his righteousness. Justice must be fulfilled and Jesus bore our punishment on the cross. The change is made by his word. He speaks and it is done. He says to us "your sins are forgiven" and they are. He says "I died for you" and so we no longer need to die eternally. He says, "by my righteousness, I set you free from the bondage of sin and guilt and the burden of the law" and we are free indeed. And he speaks to us today through the written word recorded by the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. And he speaks to us too through pastors and brothers and sisters in the church.

Yes church is boring if you compare it to the entertainment world. But what if you compare the entertainment world with God and his works? In the word of God you hear amazing stories and you yourself is a living witness. Aren't you amazed that you are still alive today? God has said, "in the day that you eat of the fruit (or in the day that you sin) you will surely die" (Gen2:17), yet Adam and Eve did not die because some poor animal died in their place. Abraham and Isaac experienced the same thing on that mountain, when God provided a ram to die in Isaac's place. And today you too experience the same thing only except the one who died is not some animal, but the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. God has come today in this very building to give us new life, a life that is more than what this world can offer.

And in this new life with a reformed and transformed mind, you no longer just see a bunch of hypocrites and sinners, but you see "little christs". You see me and the person sitting next to you as a sinner, but you should also see that I am covered with a robe that has been washed in the blood of that lamb. I wear this white robe to help you visualize what you and the person sitting next to you is also wearing.

This is what the Reformation is truly about, not the outward kind of reform but it is for the inner being that changes and transforms by the power of the gospel. That's why there's great rejoicing on Reformation Day, although I don’t think any of us would have an actual Reformation celebration at home with turkeys and cakes and whatnot. But one thing for sure is that we can be proud to be Lutherans, we can boast as Paul says here and elsewhere, not because of Martin Luther, not because of our wonderful traditions, not because of our works of the law, nor anything found in us, but we boast and be proud to be a Lutheran because we can truly be our true self here, as we openly confess that we are poor, miserable sinner, we don’t need to pretend but lay all our burdens at the cross. And in this same cross we boast, which is what Lutherans, what the Reformation is all about, it's the cross of Jesus which brings about our redemption. Therefore we boast in nothing except in Jesus and his cross, and of course in our Lutheran heritage (but not too proud).