

“God’s Righteousness”

“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Romans 3:26

Welcome to Reformation weekend! I don’t know about you, but doesn’t it feel like this momentous occasion for the Church snuck up on us this year? As many of you know, the actual date of the Reformation is October 31 and that date is still several days away. So why are we talking about it earlier this year? Well, over the years, the Church decided to recognize, observe, Reformation on the closest Sunday on or before October 31. As the day of the week on which October 31 falls, varies from year to year, so does the timing of our celebration in church.

But before this became the typical practice in churches today, October 31 had a different context. You see, many years ago, October 31, November 1, and November 2, were linked together as a three-day observance in the Church. Congregations would gather on these three separate days for services that emphasized the reality of death in every person’s life and acknowledged the lives of those who had already died and were with the Lord.

As the impact and significance of the Reformation grew in the Church, two distinct observances emerged. The three-day festival moved to an emphasis and focus primarily on November 1, and October 31 became widely associated with the Reformation. And so, the Church has moved to observing these important events in back-to-back weeks. This year the Reformation observance falls on this weekend of October 24 and 25, and the All Saints’ Day observance on the next weekend of October 31 and November 1.

While more could be said about the context of these dates in Church history, the details we’ve highlighted are enough to help us recognize two really important aspects to the setting in which Martin Luther raised his concerns about the teachings and practices of the Church in his day. The first thing we can see is his nailing of the 95 theses, those statements for discussion and debate, to the church door in Wittenburg, the social media hub of his day, if you will, on October 31, 1517, brought a lot of traffic to his conversation starter. Whether it was understood by everyone who saw it or not, as the people gathered for services that day and the next two days, his writing would be noticed. And this might make some sense to us as our culture uses publicity, marketing, and advertising on a far greater level.

Even more important, was the focus that October 31 through November 2 brought – a focus on the fragility of life. Now, this point is a little more challenging for us to appreciate. Our world today doesn’t face the frailty of life in the same way as Luther and his contemporaries did in their day. Where we have the benefits and blessings of modern medicine and technology, Luther and those of his day did not. Their existence was threatened by conditions and challenges that have by God’s grace largely become non-factors for us in the present.

Truly, it’s helpful for us to acknowledge this context even if it’s a little foreign to us. For through the setting of the nailing of Luther’s 95 theses we’re reminded that this whole Reformation movement started out of concern for clear comfort and assurance for individual consciences. This clear comfort and assurance was something that Luther personally desired. He wrestled with understanding how God’s demands could be met and His wrath appeased. And when the Church around him began promoting false security to its people with indulgences and other works of merit that were somehow supposed to deliver God’s favor and forgiveness that had already been won and freely given, he wanted to protect the people from trusting in something that wasn’t needed and ultimately wasn’t helpful.

While our Reformation celebration today has come a long way from the simple and tense moments of 1517, our bold and confident proclamations happen for the same purpose of rejoicing in the comfort and assurance we have in God’s righteousness, not our own. Even with the marvels of modern medicine, technology, etc., we still face the wages of sin, death. And the only remedy to this situation remains what God has done for us. Yes, still in this present moment faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, continue to be pillars of the clear comfort and assurance in the face of sin’s wages, death.

This week, our church family faced the fragility of life personally as a beloved pastor, friend, coworker, and dear brother in Christ died. I'm sure many of you are aware that Pastor Klausmeier was called home to the Lord early Wednesday morning of this past week. His earthly life was a great example of both the blessings and limitations of modern medicine and technology as he navigated battles with cancer throughout his life. While he made use of these modern-day advances, he also knew that they weren't permanent. And especially in these last several months, he clearly demonstrated to many of us the comfort and assurance that the Reformation uncovered for him and for each of us as he clung to God's righteousness not his own even in the face of death.

Pastor Klausmeier's recent passing is a powerful and personal reminder to each of us that sin's wages, death, isn't something we can ignore and overlook. Death is the reality that each of us will face. And yet, because of what God has done, we can face this reality with security, with comfort and assurance. Clinging to God's righteousness not our own, brings us peace. For it is His work that delivered to Pastor Klausmeier and to us the salvation we need but could never achieve.

To bring this reformation reality to light once again in this moment, to again make clear this comfort and assurance guarded by those pillars of faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, to God's glory alone, let me put in front of you just one verse from our readings this weekend. From Romans 3:26, **"It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."**

This verse caps a mighty six-verse statement from Paul about God's righteousness. A statement that greatly impacted Luther and helped lead to the 95 theses he nailed to the church door on that first Reformation Day. Paul's words clarify that God's restored relationship with His people depends on God's righteousness which He also grants to His people for the sake of Jesus Christ. Paul emphasizes that God's righteousness is effective in the present time – Paul's time, Luther's time, and now by God's grace our time. Any man-made invention of righteousness and favor before God is unnecessary and ineffective.

By declaring His righteousness to His people, God absorbs a tension that we could never work out on our own. God remains true to His character – holy, righteous, and in complete opposition to sin – yet He provides for His people, for us, the reconciliation and restoration that none of us could achieve. God remains faithful and true while also being merciful and compassionate. His wrath against sin is appeased without His sinful creation being consumed. He is consistent in His great disgust for our sin as well as His great love for us.

And the effectiveness and consistency shown in God's righteousness flows from one source only, Jesus Christ. Jesus' work, His life, death, and resurrection, are what we hold onto for salvation. With His conception by the Holy Spirit, His birth of the Virgin Mary, His suffering, death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus earned the life before God we need. By His grace and mercy, He has led us to know, trust, and believe that He has exchanged what He earned with what our sinful lives deserve. Delivering the certainty of this blessed exchange in tangible gifts of His word, baptism, and communion and not some man-made formula or paper.

The effectiveness, consistency, and certainty of God's righteousness provide us clear comfort and assurance. This remains the reason we observe the Reformation so many years later. Our celebration isn't merely about a mighty monk from over 500 years ago. Neither is it simply about a historical movement that became a fortress of reform. Our celebration is about the God, the Mighty Fortress, who made His eternal gospel known for the clear comfort and assurance that sets sinners like you and me free. And now our celebration continues to be that in the face of this life's fragility, there is security as we look to life in eternity through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, revealed in Scripture alone, to God's glory alone. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan