

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 30 October 2022
Reformation Sunday - Year C

1st Reading: *Jeremiah 31:31-34*

Psalm: 46

2nd Reading: *Romans 3:19-28*

Gospel: *John 8:31-36*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✚ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ok, we're going to go "cute" today. How many of you are familiar with the Playmobil line of toys? We discovered them when our own kids were quite young and fell in love with them. They have sets of knights with castles, Vikings with viking ships, astronauts with space ships, and lots of modern sets such as policemen, airports, camping sets - the list goes on and on. And now our children enjoy giving Playmobil sets to our grandchildren. But just hold that thought for a moment.

505 years ago tomorrow, on All Hallow's Eve, the evening before All Saints Day, in 1517, a Roman Catholic monk and priest who was a professor of theology at Wittenburg University in Germany, publicly posted a list of 95 ideas that he wanted to debate with other scholars. That Catholic monk's name was Martin Luther. The public place where he posted his list was the church door in Wittenburg, where all sorts of notices were regularly posted. And the 95 ideas, or theses, that he wanted to debate, had to do with indulgences, certificates that the church was selling that claimed to guarantee salvation for dead relatives of those who could afford to buy them.

Luther's 95 theses argued that salvation was from God and could never be bought with money, and in his theses he asked the Pope to end this practice, which went against the Bible and contradicted the Gospel.

This action set in motion a series of events which would lead eventually to Luther being excommunicated by the Pope, and the establishment of what we now call the Lutheran church. And after only 10 years, the day of the 31st of October, 1517, was being celebrated as the beginning of that movement, which we know as the Reformation. And so we still commemorate the beginning of Luther's attempts to reform the church as Reformation Day.

2017, five years ago, marked the 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation, and many special events were held to mark that anniversary, especially in Germany. And so to return to the Playmobil sets - if you are familiar with them, you may know that Playmobil is a German toy company. So in honour of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, they produced a special Martin Luther figure, which is what you now see on the screens.

Now some of you may have also heard Coral and I talk about our "adopted" German daughter, Susanne, who had come to our home in Wisconsin on a brief exchange program when our own daughters were in high school. Well, when she was a young adult, she lost both of her parents, and we took her under our wings as our unofficially "adopted" daughter. Well, in 2017 she sent me, from Germany, the Playmobil Martin Luther. He usually stands in front of me on my desk, keeping me in line, but I couldn't resist bringing him here today, so here he is.

But I also have another motive for bringing him. Those of you who are on Facebook might want to check the Good Shepherd page today because I posted an animated film, made with Playmobil figures, of the story of Martin Luther. It's quite fun, and very informative. If you haven't found our Facebook page yet, look for "Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Lena".

And now back to the real Martin Luther. Luther had no intention of breaking away from the Roman church, or of starting a new church. He simply wanted to reform the church, do away with some of the abuses that had crept in over the centuries, as the church structure had come to exhibit more and more political power, and had less to do with the spiritual well-being of those in the church.

One of those reforms was that Luther translated the entire Bible into German instead of just Latin, so that ordinary folk like you and me, and not just those with ecclesiastical power who knew Latin, could read the Bible. If you look at the book our Playmobil Luther is holding, it says "The New Testament translated by Doctor Martin Luther". And the new printing press allowed copies of Luther's translation of the Bible to reach many many people. And this, too, angered those in power in the church. So when that power structure in the Roman church rejected his reforms, Luther, and the churches that agreed with his reforms, had no choice but to break with Rome.

Yet the Lutheran churches never claimed that they were the only true church and that all others were condemned, they simply claimed that they were seeking to follow the truth revealed in Christ and attested by the early church.

The readings assigned for Reformation Day speak to this, and they were all important texts to Luther himself. In the Gospel of John we read that “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” That truth, as Jesus himself had said earlier in John’s Gospel was that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him, has faith in him, trusts in him, should not perish but have eternal life.” Salvation is by God’s grace, through our trust in Jesus, who gave himself to set us free from our slavery to sin, as Jesus also says in today’s Gospel. We cannot buy salvation, and we cannot earn it by doing enough good.

Yes, of course, we need to do as much good as we can, not to earn salvation, but because we have already been saved, and that is what salvation is all about, living in goodness instead of living in sin.

Indeed, the very first of Luther’s 95 theses is this: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying, “Repent ye, etc.,” intended that the whole life of his believers on earth should be a constant penance.”

There have been some Lutherans who have suggested otherwise, that because we are saved by grace, it doesn’t matter what we do, so we might as well continue to sin. We’ll get to heaven anyway. But Paul, in his letter to the Romans, rejects such an attitude. And it doesn’t make any sense. Salvation is not that we get whatever we want. That was Adam and Eve’s sin, that they thought they could just do whatever they wanted regardless of what God had told them. No, salvation is doing the will of God, both now, and eternally in the Resurrection. To deliberately go on sinning is to reject that salvation.

And as Luther himself said, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbors do”. Again, salvation is not about what I get for myself, it is about loving God above all else, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. And it is by God’s grace, because we are saved from sin through the selfless sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, that we are able to love God and love our neighbors.

God is not opposed to us, demanding that we earn his love, or buy his love, instead he has always been our loving Father, seeking us out and helping us. In the words of today’s Psalm:

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains shake
in the depths of the sea;**
though its waters rage and foam,
and though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

It was this Psalm that inspired Luther to write his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, which we will sing at the end of our service today.

So let us rejoice that the reforms Martin Luther made in the church have come down to us today, so that we better understand God's love for us, and can put our faith in God the Father, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in his grace.

Amen!

Copyright © 2022 - Thomas J. Mosbø