

Sermon on John 8:31-36, Romans 3:19-28  
Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thank you once again, my friends at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, for inviting me, your humble servant, Martin Luther, to come visit you and participate in this pulpit exchange with your own Pastor Erlandson. Your pastor is at this very moment preaching in the Evangelical Church in Wittenberg where I customarily preach on Sundays. I understand that he was very pleased to travel to Germany this weekend, hoping to escape this dreary weather in St. Paul, Minnesota! But I have a little joke on him! It's not any better in the little town of Wittenberg today! It is always overcast and raining at this time of year in my home town, so I was looking forward myself to coming here to escape that awful German weather! Well, I guess the joke is on me, as well! Your weather in Minnesota is pretty awful, too! No Oktoberfest vacation here! Now, I understand the meaning of our Lord Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, when he said that "the Heavenly Father sends rain and snow on the righteous and the unrighteous sinner, alike!" I'll let you guess which one of us is the righteous one and which is the sinner – your Pastor Erlandson or me, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther! But the truth is, both of us are sinners, and each one of us is also made righteous by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. We just hope and pray that the Lord will also send the sun to shine on us, as He does on both the evil and the good!

Which leads me directly to the good news today, from Paul's letter to the Romans, that "the righteousness of God has been disclosed....the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ..."

This is the truth of God that I discovered through my reading of the holy scriptures – the truth of God's mercy, his gift of grace and compassion for all people. We all can find this truth for ourselves through faith, and the hearing of God's Word, which comes to us in the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord. He came to live with us and die for our sins, and was raised by the power of God from the dead on Easter, so that you and I and all the world would know God's love and the promise of eternal life for all believers. This is the truth that frees each one of us from the power of sin and death, and gives us all new life in him.

If you ever saw the movie about my life and times, titled (surprisingly) "*Luther*" (no lack of imagination there!) – in which my character was portrayed by

that fine, handsome Hollywood actor Joseph Fiennes - you saw how greatly my life was changed when I learned this truth of God's gift of mercy and grace from the scriptures. It transformed me from suffering with guilt and fearing God's judgment for my sins, to joyful gratitude and praise to God for sending his Son to die for me, to give life to all who believe. Sharing this good news with the world, preaching and teaching the truth of justification by faith became my life's work. Because as I looked at the world around me, at the many injustices and suffering inflicted on God's children by those who lorded it over them – even, in some cases, the Church itself – I knew that if people could come to learn themselves of the gift of God's grace they would also be transformed. So it warms my heart today that God's people still hear this word of grace preached in churches all over the world. And I am overjoyed that you hear it also at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Sunday after Sunday as the scriptures are read, the good news is preached, and the sacraments are rightly administered to God's people. Glory be to God!

So it is clear to me today, as it was back in 1520 at the dawn of the Reformation, that the key to the truth of God is found in the gospel and the words of Jesus Christ, who said in our gospel today, "If you continue in my work, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." So, *what does this mean for us?* – a question I often ask in my *Small Catechism*.

Brothers and sisters, I know that you believe in Christ, and that you know the truth already. The people who first listened to Jesus in Palestine also believed they knew the truth of God, in their laws. The people of my day in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also believed that they knew the truth, which was whatever the Church in Rome taught as truth. But I came to see that this was not enough – for what the Church taught needed to be tested by what was written in the holy scriptures, as well as by conscience or reason. This became very controversial, of course, in the Church, and for this conviction I almost lost my life. Especially when I pointed out what I believed were erroneous teachings to the Church – I even challenged Pope Leo in Rome (in my little treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*)! But in time, this became the accepted way to discover God's truth – by reading God's Word ourselves, seeking its meaning, looking at the world around us and using the knowledge and reason God gives us. In this way, as individuals and as a Church, we come to truth together, guided and tested by scripture as well as reason.

So I am very proud of the Lutheran Church today, when you seek God's truth guided by Holy Scripture, taking into account your experience in the world (and that of other people) and use the gifts of knowledge and science to guide you as well. I think particularly of the work your Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has done in recent years to study human sexuality, searching the scriptures and listening to the experience of many human beings in many situations, throughout the Church. The resulting statement your Church has made on Human

Sexuality is thus based on scripture, church teachings, learnings from the social sciences and human experience. For this, you can be confident that it is a solid statement from the Lutheran Church to the world – full of grace and truth, and also helpful to the people within the Church and outside it, on a subject that sorely needs our church’s witness. You should read it! I hope that many people will read it, or hear at least some of the truth it conveys. It is a great example of solid Lutheran teaching, based on God’s Word and set in the world in which real people live. You can find it online for free, at [elca.org](http://elca.org).

But before I leave you today, I have one more thing to say to you about truth. Learning the truth also means, being open to *hearing the truth about ourselves*. You and I may not hear what we want to hear, about ourselves or the Church, but we need to hear it. For example, we may not want to hear that sometimes you and I aren’t as gracious, or welcoming, or forgiving as we may want to be or think we are. But if the truth of our lack of graciousness, welcome, or forgiveness can be pointed out to us in a way that we can hear, we can then begin to repent and change. So hearing this truth is critical. Then we can be open to being transformed by God.

We also need to hear the truth about sin and injustice in our world today, so that we can address it as the Church. I know it was hard for many people in my day during the Reformation to believe that things were wrong in society, that too many people were poor, or that the Church could be mistaken. Today, you have become much more aware that there is poverty in your own community, that there are families that are homeless, children who are failing in school, and many without adequate healthcare. Your church and others have been host to many of these families, as you have opened your doors to men, women, and children through Project Home. I have witnessed this ministry myself, and have seen the hospitality you have offered to the children of God who are without homes. This is the work of the Church, I assure you – just as much as your worship, your hymn singing, and your study of the Bible. Because this work of compassion for those who are poor, or hungry, or homeless, is what your worship, your hymns, and your reading of scripture have led you to, by faith. I pray that this work continues!

But even beyond this, I commend you when your compassion and faith in God leads you to bear witness to the world on behalf of those who are poor, hungry, or homeless. Speaking out for justice, loving your neighbor, and treating one another with love and compassion, are the greatest witness of faith that the Church can give. Greater than the greatest hymn, more glorious than the most glorious worship, more insightful than any theological treatise or sermon – because this is when the Word of God is made flesh. It is the work of our hands – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the suffering, speaking out on behalf of the poor and comforting the stranger – that speaks most clearly God’s Word of love to the world. So I admire your ELCA’s recent TV commercials – that it’s *God’s*

*Work – Our Hands.* I wish I had come up with that simple, profound phrase myself! For the work of the Church is this work that you and I do – often with our hands – which shows the love God has for all the world most clearly. And though you probably know me best for the words that I have written or said, I know that is our actions in Jesus’ name that speak loudest to others. (*This is most certainly true!*) So keep it up, brothers and sisters – your words of love and acts of faith, mercy, and compassion for others, in the name of Jesus Christ, for this is indeed our greatest witness to the gospel, and the Church’s greatest glory. Thanks be to God! And may the truth of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.