

REFORMATION SUNDAY

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

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Family attics can yield surprising and useful treasures. I remember when I was a kid living back in Indiana, one summer our family made the long cross-country drive to visit my grandparents in faraway Seattle. My senses were alive to exploring that unfamiliar and special house where my mother grew up. The tall concrete steps climbing the hill to the front porch. The kitchen breakfast nook where we ate our scrambled eggs. The fragrance of Rose Milk hand cream, which my grandmother used. And best of all, the slightly dusty yet inviting scent of the upstairs attic-like room where we kids slept under cozy rafters.

There were all kinds of interesting things stored up there in dressers and cupboards. Old games and books and dress-up clothes with elegant hats, gloves, and handbags. (My grandmother spent her career as a buyer in the millinery department of Nordstrom's in Seattle, back in the days when accessories were accessories.) There were even a couple of furs, including one shaped like a little animal that would drape around your shoulders and fasten with a clip. But the thing my sister and I liked best was the hoop skirt my mother had worn under her wedding dress in 1958. We felt like Scarlett O'Hara when we dressed up in that one.

As it turned out, some of those items ended up being more than just museum pieces to me. I remember my grandma let me take home a calligraphy book that I enjoyed using for quite a while. And little did I know when I first put on that hoop skirt that many years later I would wear the wedding dress itself for my own wedding.

I'm thinking about family attics on this Reformation Sunday, because today we reflect on our heritage as Lutherans, children of the Reformation, Martin Luther, and his teachings. Being Lutheran puts us in a proud family line, as it were. It gives us a fascinating attic full of Lutheran family treasures to rummage around in – including understandings and practices we'll find valuable and useful for our lives today.

Now, you might ask why Lutheran heritage matters, especially today when it's common for people to move from Methodist to Presbyterian to Episcopalian and so forth. We're all Christians, aren't we? But each tradition has a little different DNA, or personality, a little different lens on the good news of Christ – and that's valuable.

As you and I go to share God's good news, it's important to know who we are and where we come from. When we lose our memory, we lose a lot of who we are. So on

this Reformation Sunday, I'd like us to take a few of those treasures out of our Lutheran attic, examine them, try them on – and see what they have to offer today.

Our birth story as Lutherans is pretty famous. We were born almost 500 years ago out of Martin Luther's struggle against corrupt practices in the Catholic church. That included the selling of indulgences, which were certificates that claimed to forgive your sins and set you free from purgatory – for a fee, which went toward church projects like building St. Peter's in Rome. It's no good condemning the Roman Catholics, because at that time, "them was us." The whole Western Church had lost its way and the message of Christ had been obscured.

Martin Luther was one of many reformers who helped to set it free. Luther was a Catholic monk, priest, and university professor who struggled profoundly with guilt before an angry and condemning God. He was first and foremost a Bible scholar, and it was through studying scripture, especially the book of Romans and the passage we read this morning, that Luther discovered his key insight. We are set right with God – sins forgiven – through the free gift of Jesus Christ and nothing else. Not our good works, not indulgence-buying, not even sincere groveling will save us. We are saved only through grace -- the freely-given, unconditional love that God extends through Jesus Christ. Luther uncovered that truth right here in Romans:

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom 3:23-24)

This key concept broke scripture wide open for Luther and let the gospel become the "good news" it was meant to be, for him and for us.

Armed with this understanding, Martin Luther posted "95 Theses" on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on October 21, 1517 – that is, 95 topics for debate on the state of the church. People copied the list on newly-invented printing presses, and it soon ignited a storm across Europe. Martin Luther didn't set out to break away from the Roman Church, and he didn't approve of his followers being called "Lutherans" – it was originally a derogatory term coined by their opponents. But when Luther was excommunicated he boldly rose to his place in history and opened up a new movement.

We are children of this reforming movement, and we proudly carry on the spirit under an often-quoted motto: "Ever reforming." For us, this means being humble before God when it comes to our own institutions and congregations. We must always seek to be faithful to what is essential — the gospel of Christ. Serving Christ's good news is what we're about. So in a changing world, there will be beloved church institutions that have to change, to move from focusing inward on serving the self to focusing outward to sharing God's good news with others. It's not comfortable to be part of an "ever reforming" church, but it's part of our DNA and we hope to be faithful to the call.

Some parts of the Roman Church tradition we have preserved. We Lutherans continue to be a liturgical church, like the Catholics and the Episcopalians. This means our worship service follows a traditional shape, usually with a musical setting.

The sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion remain important to us. Luther narrowed these down from the seven sacraments in the Roman church, keeping the two that are specifically commanded by Christ in scripture.

We Lutherans are a singing church. That comes directly from Luther, who's been called the father of congregational singing. Luther believed that singing simple hymns in a robust way would open people's hearts to receive God's life-giving Word. He wrote over 35 hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress" and our hymn of the day for today. So strong was his musical passion that Luther wrote: *"Next to the word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our hearts, minds and spirits. A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs!"* (Center for Church Music, www.songsandhymns.org) Well, that's Luther for you!

Besides being a singing church, we Lutherans are a thinking church. Luther wrote volumes of treatises and sermons, but he was at heart a teacher. He employed his mind in the service of faith, and so do we. In Lutheran churches, we don't check our intellect at the door. In interchurch dialogue, our strong and clear theology is really the Lutherans' unique contribution. It's often summed up in a three-fold way:

Grace Alone – Faith Alone – Scripture Alone
(Latin: *Sola gratia, Sola fide, Sola Scriptura*)

Grace alone: We are saved by grace alone. By God's unconditional love. That word, grace... I often picture it as God's hand reaching out in a graceful, gracious way toward us. God making the first move to save us. Grace alone.

Faith alone: Faith is all we need. Even faith as tiny as a mustard seed, as the Bible says. Because it isn't our works that save us, it is God's work. Faith alone.

Finally, Scripture alone: It was scripture that fueled the Reformation, which is one reason preaching remains such a big part of worship for Lutherans— interpreting the message of scripture. And one of Luther's most enduring accomplishments was translating the entire Bible into the common German language, so ordinary people could read and interpret it for themselves. We still keep the Bible central. We don't interpret it literalistically, or use it as a bludgeon, but we see it as the window to new life. The Bible -- now that's a treasure worth bringing down from the attic!

Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone... I could keep rummaging around among our precious heirlooms all day... There are so many things here we can use.

I think of Luther's famous teaching that all of us are "saints and sinners" – both at the same time. We are human beings, frail and broken, but we are also shining with the love and holiness of God.

I think of Luther's teaching about the "priesthood of all believers." His conviction that not just pastors but every person is a minister of Christ, that we each have a daily calling or vocation that serves God, as we serve other people.

I think of Luther's famous "theology of the cross" — his conviction that God is revealed most powerfully through suffering, not glory. That our savior kneeling down to serve and stretching himself out to die reveals the very heart of God. So that when we are kneeling, or when we are hurting, we can count on God's love meeting us there, with enduring kindness that adds strength to our strength.

There are so many, many treasures in our attic... And the family who owns that attic is much larger than you might suspect. There are over 68 million Lutheran Christians in 79 countries around the world. And perhaps the most powerful thing that unites us is the conviction that all of this is God's gracious gift. All of it springs from God's merciful and forgiving presence with us in Jesus Christ.

Our life with God – it's God's gift.

Being a community together – it's God's gift.

Having a hope that sustains us through all things – God's gift.

Thanks be to God. Amen.