

## “Pardoned” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Reformation Sunday October 29, 2023

- I. **Romans 3:23-24** – “<sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,  
<sup>24</sup>and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”
- II. **One of Steven Spielberg’s** many movies was called, *Catch Me If You Can*.
  - a. A main character, Frank, was played by Leonardo Di-Caprio, who was a con man going around impersonating different people...
    - i. First, he was Pan Am pilot, then a medical doctor... then he fell in love with a lady named Brenda, where he faked being a lawyer who also happened to be a Lutheran!
    - ii. He even seems to think he can just live happily ever after... except the FBI shows up at his engagement party.
    - iii. So, Frank confesses to Brenda: “I’m not a doctor, I never went to medical school, or was a Harvard graduate, or a Lutheran.”
    - iv. She tries to respond, and finally says, “Frank, you’re not a Lutheran?”
      1. For her—and possibly for her attorney father—that was the most important part of his identity.
  - b. What does it mean to us to be Lutheran?
    - i. And what is Reformation Day about?
    - ii. Is it mainly the celebration of a historical or cultural heritage?
    - iii. Or, is Lutheran more about the Bible itself?
  - c. Each year, I tell the amazing story of Martin Luther, because the hand of God was certainly involved in the whole process as he sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church.
    - i. The name “Lutheran” was used as an insult, because Luther never wanted followers – the whole point was following Jesus Christ... not Luther.
    - ii. Being a Lutheran is much more than a tradition or a history... we are grounded in the Scriptures and the gift of our faith in Christ.
- III. **Luther’s faith** was full of doubts and fear leading up to the Reformation.
  - a. He grew up with a strict father who wanted him to become a real lawyer (unlike Leonardo Di-Caprio’s character) – which turned out to be a blessing, because he was raised up in rigorous schools.
  - b. He learned Latin, the language of the educated, and was even able to gain access to a Bible in the library to read it himself (most people didn’t get to read the Scriptures back then).
  - c. In a strange turn of events, Luther was almost struck by lightning, so he immediately vowed to become a priest and joined a monastery.
    - i. All throughout his education (he became a priest, a professor, and earned a doctorate) Luther struggled with God’s wrath and how he

could ever live up to the unattainable standards of, “the righteousness of God.” (vs 21)

- d. The Roman Church at that time was teaching that a person could be forgiven of their guilt for sins, but that penance or payment for those sins still needed to be carried out... pay penance now, or in Purgatory... which was a kind of interim place to pay for sins after death.
- e. Luther confessed, did penance by kneeling on stone floors, whipping himself, going with no food, and praying for hours... in fact, some would call him obsessed with getting right with God.
- f. Unfortunately, all those years led to more doubts that there wasn't any assurance of being saved in the end.
- g. In the middle of Luther's wrestling, the Roman Church was selling indulgences to people, which was a certificate issued by the Pope that you could buy for yourself or anyone else to bypass Purgatory.
  - i. Members from Luther's own congregation were bringing these indulgences to him... either expecting the forgiveness of sins because they held a piece of paper – or they had false feelings relief because they supposedly didn't have to worry about Purgatory.
- h. This is the historical setting in which Luther wrote 95 Theses to be debated within the Church and by academics... so he wrote them in Latin.
  - i. He posted them on the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, as an announcement for the discussion to take place among scholars – but someone got a copy, translated it to German, the common language... and printed copies on the Guttenberg press.
  - ii. The marvel of a printing press allowed thousands of copies to be distributed rather than just a few – and the spark was lit, as regular folks began to debate the practices of the Roman Church that did not line up with the Bible.
- i. Of course, the story goes on, and I don't have two hours to complete it... the bottom line is that Martin Luther stood against the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and brought us all back to the Bible and the most important thing of all – we are justified by God's grace as a gift. (vs 24)

IV. **St. Paul's letter to the Romans** is the topic of our adult Bible study.

- a. We happened to cover these same verses over the past two weeks.
- b. The first two chapters of this letter help us to realize that no one has any standing before God...
  - i. The Jews thought they were God's chosen ones, so of course they felt like they were saved... and they looked down on those who were outside their heritage and family tree.
    - 1. I wonder sometimes if we Lutherans are no different, as we look down on other Christian church bodies who don't have our history and practice.

- ii. But Paul’s message is clear...Not one person can claim to be perfect or righteous, because every person is born with sin that is passed on from the first people.
      - 1. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (vs 23)
  - c. No one can find their way to God... no one can do enough good works or pay enough for their sins... no one has any assurance that they are saved by what they do.
    - i. Paul changed Martin Luther’s faith life by clarifying that the “righteousness of God” (vs 21) is better stated, “The righteousness from God.”
    - ii. The missing component that plagued Luther all those years was understanding the true Word of God – what the Bible actually says is the righteousness from God is not something we have to live up to... rather, it is handed over to us as a gift through faith.
    - iii. Stop and soak that in for a moment – God gives us His righteousness
- V. **What Martin Luther was seeking is** the key to our identity as Lutherans.
  - a. Luther was seeking Jesus Christ and His one-time, all-sufficient payment for our sins... no more sacrifice after the fact, just forgiveness.
  - b. All of us know that we cannot be perfect or live up to God’s standards, but Jesus did just that.
  - c. I try to convey how hopeless the situation is when we don’t have Jesus, because in the end, God’s wrath is placed on those who don’t believe in Jesus as their Savior... or, for those who do believe, the wrath of God was redirected onto the Son.
    - i. In the darkest hour that the world has ever seen, Roman soldiers nailed our Savior to a cross... and in those terrible hours of suffering, the very punishment that we were due came down on Jesus.
    - ii. “For our sake [the Father] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)
    - iii. We “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (vs 24)
  - d. The trial is now complete, and through our faith in Jesus, God calls us not guilty... You have received a full pardon with no strings attached.
  - e. Let me be clear, when you die and see Jesus face-to-face, He will not ask whether you are a Lutheran... He will know whether you believed in Him and trusted in the works that He did on your behalf.
  - f. We are pardoned not by an indulgence... doing extra penance and paying for our sins... nor by being a good person... we are pardoned by the all-sufficing work of Jesus.
  - g. On this day of remembrance, the Reformation is much less about Martin Luther and much more about what the Bible really says:

- i. The righteousness from God is a gift we receive by grace through faith in Jesus... the one who died and rose again for our forgiveness.
- h. No better words can be said, and no better words can be trusted. Amen!