

**"We Modern-Day Lutherans  
Re-Live Luther's Experience"  
Weekend of November 5, 2006  
Sermon on Romans 1:16-17  
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI  
Pastor Karl Walther**

Jesus promises us: *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Amen.

God's Word for our special consideration on this Commemoration of the Lutheran Reformation is Romans chapter one, verses sixteen and seventeen. Here the Apostle Paul writes, under inspiration of God the Holy Spirit:

***I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."***

This is God's Spirit-inspired Word of Jesus Christ.

### **Introduction: We Modern-Day Lutherans Re-Live Luther's Experience**

Dear fellow Lutheran Christians—grateful together for our heritage:

Great human institutions, which have an enduring quality, usually were established on the basis of a single insight, and they usually flourish when they stick to that insight.

That's a mouthful! But let me explain by giving some examples:

...The United States of America. The USA was established by founders who organized it around the single theme of freedom. The USA has lasted all these years – and flourished most greatly – when it treasured its heritage of freedom. I'd even go so far as to say that it is the freedom God gave to our nation which has allowed for the gospel to spread and to bring so many blessings to the citizens it has reached.

...Another example: Ford Motor Company. Ford Motor Company was organized around the theme of mass production. Ford has lasted all these years – whether its stock prices are up or down (!) – by its continued ability to produce lots of automobiles at the lowest possible cost.

...One more: Microsoft Corporation. Microsoft Corporation was organized around the single idea that computers had to be both useful and affordable to the average citizen and each small business. Microsoft has flourished by sticking to that single idea.

...And now the example I really want to get to: the Lutheran Church. Today we celebrate the four hundred eighty-ninth birthday of the Lutheran Church. Although it started out small, today some sixty million people world-wide call themselves Lutherans.

How has the Lutheran Church endured so long? Why has the Lutheran Church flourished? Well, the answer is: The Holy Spirit has accomplished all that! But it's also not wrong to observe that the very first Lutheran had a single very important insight—and the Lutheran Church has flourished whenever and wherever it has clung to his single insight.

So: WE MODERN-DAY LUTHERANS RE-LIVE LUTHER'S EXPERIENCE. Today, on the basis of the Word of the Lord I just read, I want to explain to you just what Luther's experience was, and I want to apply it to us....

## Part One: We Need a Right Standing before God

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, in the year of our Lord fourteen eighty-three. From little on, Luther was blessed with a keenly developed conscience. Although Luther was guilty of no big and obvious sins, his conscience and (to some extent) his church taught him well that God's own standard for him was perfect holiness. Luther's conscience never quit accusing him of falling short of that standard.

So, in an effort to obtain the holiness God demanded, in his early twenties Martin Luther entered a monastery—a place where men were supposed to support one another in living the perfect sort of a life that God requires. From there Luther was also chosen to teach the Scriptures. But all of that didn't help him. The more he worked and the more he studied, the more he was haunted with his sinful guilt in the presence of an angry God.

He summed it up this way—with reference, actually, to God's Word to us today. He said, and I quote: “The one expression in Romans chapter one, verse seventeen, concerning the ‘righteousness of God’ blocked the way for me. For I hated the expression ‘righteousness of God’ since I had been instructed ... to understand it ... as the ‘formal or active righteousness’ in which God proves Himself righteous by punishing sinners and the unjust.”

Do you hear what Luther is saying? He is saying: God is righteous; God is holy; God is perfect love. And unless I am perfectly righteous and holy, and perfect in love, God would have to lower his unchangeable standards in order to accept me, which of course he cannot do. Therefore, God hates me; he punishes me; and he cannot do otherwise eternally.”

Fellow sinners: Nothing has changed in the past five hundred years since Luther. Our path to God still starts at this spot.

We've got to realize that: Our every failure to serve our God makes him hate us. Our every unkind word makes him hate us. Our every dirty thought makes God hate us. Our very sinful nature makes God hate us.

And there's nothing we can do to change that. Our projects – however grand – have no power to remove a single sin. Our words – however nice – cannot purchase one single droplet of mercy on God's part. Our intentions – however praiseworthy – cannot make him love us. We are corrupt. God's righteous wrath must crush us.

And God grant that our preachers always tell us that!

## Part Two: The Gospel Gave Us a Right Standing before God

You see: we Lutherans, like Luther, understand God's anger over sin. So, where do we find relief?

*I am not ashamed of the gospel.* Oh, and this is God's Word to us today! ***I am not ashamed of the gospel***, or very well interpreted: “I boast in the good news which is Jesus Christ.”

*I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* For every shipwrecked soul, for every soul being swept under by the righteous anger of God, for every soul drowning in its sinfulness—the good news of Jesus is power for salvation. What kind of power would it take to rescue a world full of drowning sinners? How much fuel? How big a ship? What kind of manpower? – It would be impossible! But the good news, which is Jesus, has that kind of power!—in Paul's day: ***first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.***

Now, how did this work? How could the gospel, the good news of Jesus, rescue a world full of sinners? ***In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed*** – the perfect

righteousness a holy God must demand is the perfect righteousness a loving God must give! This righteousness is *a righteousness that is by faith*—and in the Bible, the only real faith is faith in the true God, most pointedly faith in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is *a righteousness that is by faith* in Christ *from first to last, just as it is written* – Habakkuk chapter two, verse four – *"The righteous will live by faith."*

That was the insight Martin Luther rediscovered in the Scriptures. Here's what he wrote: "Finally, after days and nights of wrestling with the difficulty, God had mercy on me, and then I was able to note...: The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God in a passive sense, that righteousness through which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The just shall live by faith.'"

Fellow Lutherans: Nothing has changed in the past five hundred years since Luther. This is still our path to God.

Yes, it's very true that a righteous God cannot accept and approve dirty little sinners. It's just that God doesn't consider you a dirty little sinner anymore. The gospel declares that he has cleaned you up through Jesus Christ.

It's very true that a holy God cannot accept into his holy presence anything but perfectly holy people. It's just that God does consider you perfectly holy. The gospel proclaims that he has declared you perfectly holy through Jesus Christ.

So, the gospel, the good news of Jesus, whether it's in God's Word or his sacraments—the gospel has worked in your heart confidence that Christ's work avails for you. Christ's preaching? It's as if that were you preaching now! His teaching? That's yours, too! Christ's miracles, his love, his obedience—as far as God is concerned, you did them all; they have been transferred from Christ's account to your account through God-given faith in Jesus.

And the Gospel has worked in your heart confidence that Christ's death also avails for you. In Gethsemane, Jesus accepted your many sins upon himself. During his trials, Jesus was declared guilty for your sins. And on the cross, Jesus went through hell for you. The gospel declares that: when he rose, he left your every sin buried in his tomb—dead and gone forever. And when Christ rose to life, you rose to eternal life—that's God's guarantee.

God grant that our Lutheran preachers always, always tell us that!

## **Conclusion: Therefore We Boast in the Gospel**

Now, when Luther rediscovered all of this, he said: "Then I felt as if I had been completely reborn and had entered Paradise through widely opened doors. Instantly all Scripture looked different to me. As intensely as I had formerly hated the expression 'righteousness of God' I now loved and praised it as the sweetest of concepts; and so this passage of Paul actually was the portal of paradise to me."

And: oh, how that changed Luther's life! From this time on, he labored ceaselessly to proclaim the message of Jesus. His writings alone make up a small library! And multiple times, threatened with death, Luther stared Satan in the face, and he would not back down from his confidence in Christ Jesus on the basis of the Scriptures.

Martin Luther was not ashamed of the gospel. He boasted in the gospel.

And so did his followers! Some faced death, because they wouldn't back down from their confidence in Christ. Most of the earliest Lutherans faced years – even decades – of war and famine, because they wouldn't back off the gospel. Centuries later, no few moved halfway across the world to a land – our land! – where unhindered they could believe and proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Lutherans in generations past were not ashamed of the gospel. They boasted in the gospel.

Now, how about us? How about us modern-day Lutherans? who follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther and the Apostle Paul according to the saving teaching of Christ our Savior himself.

Are we ashamed of the gospel? Is the modern-day USA's so-called "political correctness" enough to keep us from speaking up to others: that Jesus – Jesus' righteousness! Jesus' resurrection! – is absolutely the only way to heaven? Or are we going to stare Satan in the face and kick him in the teeth? by saying, "Jesus is my righteousness. Jesus is the world's righteousness. And everybody needs to know that!"

How about us modern-day Lutherans? Will we boast in the gospel? Will we take all that we are and all that we have – all our time, and all our talents – and use them around the organizing principle that nothing really counts except Jesus Christ, and his righteousness for us forever? Are we willing to take a generous portion of our resources – yeah, probably even more than we figure we can do without – and throw those thousands of dollars in the face of Satan by using them to support the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Yes! Yes, we will boast in the gospel! No, we will not be ashamed of it, nor disown it! We know that the good news which is Jesus is life for us now and life for us forever.

And God grant us preachers who are clearly willing to tell us that, week after week—no matter what! Amen.

Jesus says to us: "*Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.... But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*" Amen.