

New Hope Lutheran Church

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October 25, 2020 Reformation Sunday

Coming Events

Nov 1 10:00 Finnish worship service **Voima Hall**
2:00 Worship service † **Regent St**

In our prayers Norma, Fred, Pentti, Esme, Martha.

Funeral *Erma Jaatinen 86 yrs*
Joyce Hill 86 yrs
Svante Kalijarvi 84 yrs

Prayer of the Day

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Previous Sunday sermons and bible studies can be found on the website.

First Reading Jeremiah 31:31 – 34

31 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. **32** It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. **33** “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **34** No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Psalm 46

1 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.
5 God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.
6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
7 The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.
8 Come and see what the LORD has done, the desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.
10 He says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”
11 The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Second Reading Romans 3:19 – 28

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. **20** Therefore no

one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. **21** But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. **22** This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. **25** God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—**26** he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. **27** Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. **28** For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Gospel according to John 8:31 – 36

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. **32** Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” **33** They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” **34** Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. **35** Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. **36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

October 25, 2020 – Reformation Sunday Free, But Not Cheap

When I was growing up, there were five of us siblings, and needless to say, we didn’t always get along. Occasionally there were times that, for our own purposes, we may have done things to harm another. And then the crying started. And then a parent would get involved. And one of the expectations of a parental interrogation was that the truth would be told.

When I recall my feelings during some of those interrogations, the words of Jesus in our gospel lesson today didn’t seem all that true. Jesus may have said that *the truth will set you free*, but sometimes telling the truth seemed to get you

into a lot of trouble. And so you would attempt to whitewash the story a bit, so you didn't come out looking like such a bad character. The truth was however, that each one of us at some point had done something wrong, even if we didn't want to admit it. If we would have had an allowance, we probably might have even attempted to buy our way out of trouble.

And that brings me to Martin Luther who spoke out against such practices, because he was concerned that the church was teaching that a person could work their way out of sin, or buy their way around it. This set him off, because his past had been filled with so many doubts about his own sins blocking his path to heaven. As a monk he had viewed himself as so filled with sin: sinful thoughts, sinful desires, all kinds of things that made him sinful – that he hadn't been able to see any way clear to ever being accepted into heaven. He was absolutely traumatized by how sinful he was, believing that he had to be absolutely sinless to get to heaven.

Our lesson from Romans was one that was key to Luther's later understanding of how God saves us. In later years, after becoming a professor of the Bible, he came to understand that while we do indeed sin, recognizing our sin is the way we find our way to Christ. Once we hit rock bottom, once we see the magnitude of our sins (thanks to the 10 commandments), it is then that we realize we have no hope of making it into heaven on our own. Our debt is too great. Any debt, however large or small, is too great, so we need someone to pay on our behalf. And this is what Christ did for all believers on the cross. The debt is paid for all who believe.

This revelation was perhaps Luther's greatest achievement. The consolation that he was saved, in spite of all his sins, was what gave him the strength and courage to challenge the church leadership in what was being taught. In essence, it spurred on the Reformation and a whole new understanding of how God works.

But over the years I've been discovering that the old idea that we somehow work our own way into heaven is still lodged in the minds of the general public. I once met a man who, upon learning I am a pastor, informed me outright that he didn't sin. Others since have peppered me with comments inferring that with all the good they do in the world, it outweighs the bad, so they feel they are good to go to heaven. I never realized that getting into heaven was like a set of scales where, if one outweighs the other, that determines your fate – and the reason for that is because I can't find such information

anywhere in the Bible! There is no place that says that, if you do enough good deeds, they will be recorded on a heavenly scorecard somewhere, and tallied up at the end.

I suspect part of the problem here is that people aren't aware of just how much all of us sin. If we never take time to contemplate our sins (such as during confession and forgiveness), how might we realize how great our sins are? Luther laid it out pretty well in his small catechism when it came to the 10 commandments. Sin is not only an action, but also present in our thoughts and words, as we often admit during confession, having sinned in "*thought, word, and deed.*" Most people seem to carry the deep belief that if they haven't robbed a bank or stabbed someone, then they haven't sinned in any way. And perhaps, because they feel they haven't committed a bad deed, they must only be committing good deeds pleasing to God.

Now I could go on and on with how much we sin, but I'll leave that for another day because I can't help wondering if the reason people feel they are such saints is because they believe good works alone are our ticket to heaven. If it wasn't so, why would anyone do good things for others? This was a valid question in Martin Luther's day as well. If we believe Jesus exists and paid for our sins, what more do we need to do? Such an attitude was deemed as "cheap grace" by theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and is backed up by St. Paul's speech in Romans 6:1-2. "*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?*"

Bonhoeffer, Luther, and even the Bible point out that if we truly realize just how far in debt we actually are, and then realize just how much was paid on our behalf, the resulting emotion should be one of thanks, and thanksgiving. And in order to give thanks, we then act on God's behalf, speaking up for justice, caring about the sick, the poor, and those who are silenced. In other words, our good works aren't to be seen as a point system getting us into heaven, but rather as a way to give thanks to God for the saving of our souls. God does not respond to what we do – We respond to what God does!

It's actually a pretty simple concept, but I worry that it has become so distorted over time that people don't understand it anymore. It certainly doesn't help when there are false prophets out there who collect immense funds from people who don't understand this and still believe they can somehow buy their way in. And if people do think they can work or buy their

way into heaven, on their own, is it any wonder they don't see a need for the local church community?

This is the issue that first inspired Martin Luther to put into motion the events that led to the Reformation, which, in turn, led the church eventually to the truth spoken about in our Gospel lesson. Today, among other things, we are facing that same issue. The difference today is that no government or institution, is pushing it on people, they have made that summary on their own thanks (at least in part) to the influence of a consumeristic lifestyle. We live in a world where it is incorrectly believed that the only way to get ahead is by your own efforts without help from anybody or anything. That logic has been transferred into the spiritual realm.

It is up to us then, to do something about that. Not that we should terrorize the streets like some sort of "sin police" writing violations for all those we see sinning, nor do we need to be judging all in hopes that they will see their sins and repent. Far too often, our sins can catch up with us, and people at some level do realize that they are in need of forgiveness.

What we need to do instead is to call out those who make comments that suggest one can work their way into heaven. If someone suggests they are perfect, gently question them on that. If someone suggests that their good deeds outweigh the bad, they may need a reminder that any amount of sin is too much without God's forgiveness - which is available to all who call on God. For us, it's not about gaining heaven points, but rather a thankful response to God's love shown to us, and knowing that God wants all to be saved. While we cannot, and should not force anything onto people, we need to let them know the truth of God's love.

In this time of pandemic, I feel that we are in the process of re-defining what the church is, and why it matters. Caring about others' spiritual health should be our mission at this time. It is time to let the truth out once again, that while grace is certainly free, it didn't come cheaply. Amen.

Prayers

As we commemorate the Reformation this year, we do so in a time of pandemic. With the ecumenical and global family, we bring our prayers for healing. And we join with our sisters and brothers of other communions in joint service to the

neighbor, in restraint and vigilance, and in shared witness. Let us now pray for the world, the church and all those in need.

God of mercy, throughout history your goodness prevails, open the hearts of all people to discover the deep bond of community. Show us your goodness and mercy that endure forever. Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God of peace, bend that which is inflexible, the identity barriers that divide, the attachments that thwart reconciliation. Bring peace in this world. Restore wholeness among us and show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God, our healer, come to our aid as COVID-19 continues to spread, heal those who are sick, protect families and friends from being infected. Support those in public health and medical services. Strengthen our resolve to eradicate all diseases, malaria, dengue, HIV & AIDS, and many others. Show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God of justice, hasten justice for those suffering under the power of evil and every form of oppression and greed. Give new life to all. Show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God, rock and fortress, protect refugees, those without homes or security, all the abandoned children. Help us always to defend human rights and dignity. Show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God creator, all creation groans in expectation, convert us from exploitation. Teach us to live in harmony with your creation. Show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God of mercy, strengthen and protect those who are persecuted for faith in you and those of other faiths who suffer persecution. Give us the courage to profess our faith. Your mercy endures forever. Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God of life, heal painful memories, transform complacency and indifference, inspire and sustain our ecumenical journey from conflict to communion, all of us branches on the one vine, Jesus Christ. Show us your mercy! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

God our sustenance, bring us together at your eucharistic table. Turn us to you and one another. Nurture within and among us a communion rooted in your love. Your mercy endures forever! Hear us O God, **Your mercy is great.**

Listen as we call on you, O God, and enfold in your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen