

“Our Reformation Hero”

Romans 3:19-28

October 29, 2017

Reformation Sunday (Observed)

Do you have a hero? A hero is defined as someone who has extraordinary talents and who accomplishes fantastic things. Normally we choose our heroes from the athletic world, the entertainment world, the music world, and so on. In previous generations, people also chose their heroes from political figures and military leaders. I'm not so sure they do that today.

Heroes can bring us great joy. When our sports hero performs admirably and leads our team to the World Series, the Super Bowl, or the championship in any other sports and wins, we are ecstatic and filled with joy. (Remember me after the World Series last year.) Meeting our favorite movie star heroes or hearing our musical heroes can be a thrilling, and sometimes intense, experience. Remember what a sensation Beatlemania was in the early 1960s. It nearly overwhelmed our country.

Heroes can also inspire us. There was a time when our political heroes could motivate us to action. I think of when a youthful John F. Kennedy became president and inspired a whole generation to serve in areas such as the Peace Corps. Military heroes could inspire us to elect them as president. Dwight D Eisenhower is a good example of that.

The downside of having heroes though is that they are always flawed individuals and sometimes can cause us great disappointment as we see them fall. We are greatly disheartened when our sports heroes are caught taking performance-enhancing drugs; our music or entertainment heroes are arrested for using illegal drugs; our military heroes exhibit unethical behavior; or our political heroes are convicted of taking bribes. These people are no longer heroes in most people's eyes. They damage, not only themselves, but those who held them up as heroes. Fallen heroes make us skeptical and cynical. This might cause us to give up our interest in sports, music/entertainment, politics, or the military.

Now, even if our heroes give us much joy, inspire us to lofty heights, and stay clean from moral, ethical, or legal problems, there is still one problem with heroes. They don't last. Other sports heroes emerge as present superstars grow old. Musical tastes change from year to year. New movie stars appear on the scene to replace aging movie stars. Politicians and military heroes eventually retire. And all heroes will die.

Nevertheless, we continue to look for heroes – ones who will not disappoint us, hurt us, or take away our love for their area of expertise. We look for heroes who will last. Where will we find our heroes today?

Today, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, an event which rocked the world. It not only had a profound effect on the Church, but affected nearly every institution of this world. Naturally, this means we celebrate a great hero who is glorified and remembered for this great event. Will he be the great hero that we are looking for? Or, will he be just like any other hero with flaws and failures which disappoint us and make us cynical?

Martin Luther is considered to be a great hero. We don't call this the Lutheran Reformation for nothing. He did great things. He showed great courage by daring to question erroneous teaching and erroneous practices, such as sale of indulgences, when he nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg 500 years ago this Tuesday. This alone would have been enough to make him a hero for in the eyes of most Germans and give them great joy and excitement.

Luther showed great faith by restoring the Gospel of Jesus Christ under the guidance and by the power of the Holy Spirit. While most of the people at Luther's time (and many today) obsess on how they can do enough good works and become good enough for God, Luther's study of Scriptures revealed that a person is justified (that is, becomes right with God) by God's grace (undeserved love) alone, which is received by faith alone, and is revealed by Scripture alone, for the sake of Christ alone.

Luther showed great faithfulness to the Word of God by challenging the authority of both Church and State. He refused to give up the gospel, despite the Church's threat of excommunication. And he refused to compromise the teaching of God's Word, despite the state's threat of death. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther boldly refused to take back or recant anything that the Bible said. This placed them outside of the Church and salvation (according to the church's understanding). It also made him an outlaw who could be killed in a time.

Luther showed great zeal for teaching the Word of God and spreading the message of salvation to all the world. Aided by the recently invented printing press, he was prolific in his publishing of the German Bible, the Small and Large Catechism's, pamphlets on various biblical topics, and so on. Luther's writings instructed the people of God while, at the same time, evangelizing the world.

Even the world today recognizes the influence and accomplishments of Martin Luther. Both those in the church and those outside the Church marvel at the capabilities of Martin Luther and are inspired by his work.

However, Luther, in addition to doing great things, did some horrible things, as well. He often used very harsh and rude language in answering his critics. His behavior, at times, was very crude, especially toward his enemies. His writings against the Jews are horrible and cannot be defended, even by the most ardent of Lutherans.

Luther fails us as a hero. Not only is Luther not perfect, but he is a bold and brazen sinner. But like every hero who is gone before him, he has a lot of company. Our text for today says there are no perfect heroes. There are also no perfect ordinary people like you and me. There is no difference among people. All have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God. As good as Luther was, he stood guilty before God he found the gospel and even after he found the gospel.

Martin Luther may not be considered by some to be a suitable as the hero for our Reformation Day celebration. But that's okay. Why? Luther was never the hero of this Reformation in the first place. Despite the good things that Luther did and all of the success he accomplished, the Reformation was never about Martin Luther. The Reformation is still all about Jesus.

Jesus is not really a hero. He is more than a hero. He is a Savior. In the long haul, we don't really need someone to excite us, fill us with joy, or inspire us to greater

things in this world. We need someone to rescue us from the mess we have created for ourselves by our sin in this fallen world. We don't need someone to inspire us when death comes and show us how to successfully accept death. We need someone who can conquer death and bring us through death to life.

As great as Martin Luther was, Jesus Christ is better. As much as Martin Luther did, Jesus Christ did more. In order to be rescued from our sin and from this fallen world, we must be righteous (that is, holy). In Luther's time and in our time as well, many think this means by our own effort to obey the Law of God. But this is impossible. We cannot do that. As our text for today says, "for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

However, God, in His great grace and marvelous mercy, devised a way to bring this righteousness to humanity apart from the law. This is, St. Paul writes, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Instead of trusting ourselves, our merit, and our obedience, we trust in Jesus Christ, His merit, and His work on our behalf. In God's system of perfect justice, when holiness is not there, all violations have to be accounted for. Jesus paid the price to account for all of our violations of the law.

This is the meaning of the word "redemption." To redeem someone or something is to pay the price to get them back again. Jesus paid the price to get us back from sin, death, and the power of the devil and hell. He did not use money to pay this debt. All the money in the world could not pay the price for one of us. Rather, he paid with something much more valuable – His own blood, shed on the cross. Immediately before Jesus died, He cried out in a loud voice, "It is finished!" He did not mean that his life was finished or that he was sorrowfully giving up on His life's work. Instead, in triumph, He was declaring, "It is finished! It is paid in full! The debt of sin is paid and the punishment of death is pardoned."

St. Paul sums it up by saying, "For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." Our sins are paid for, redeemed by Christ by His blood shed in His death on the cross. We no longer bear the guilt or deserve the punishment of eternal death. Our sins are covered by the blood of Christ (that is, propitiated). God's anger no longer threatens us. God's punishment no longer applies to us. Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead to life is God's stamp of approval on His sacrifice.

What about spiritual heroes like Martin Luther? What about our boasting of Luther on Reformation Day or our pride in ourselves for being Lutherans? Our text is very clear. There is no place for boasting. It is excluded. None of us – from shameful sinner to glorious hero – can stand before God on our own. There is no difference among people: Jews/Gentiles; Christians/non-Christians; Lutherans/non-Lutherans; good people/bad people. All have sinned. All fall short of God's glory. Boasting about our merit, our heritage, or our actions is excluded because, as St. Paul declares, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

There is no need to be disappointed and disheartened in heroes or to seek better, more perfect heroes. Martin Luther and other Christian heroes are flawed sinners, just like you and me. Martin Luther and other Christian heroes are justified by grace through faith apart from the works of the law, just like you and me. They share our flaws and weaknesses. We share in their salvation by grace. Therefore, we need no hero. We have a Savior, Jesus Christ. He redeems us by His blood. He rescues us from death. He reforms and renews our lives. And he brings us to everlasting life through His resurrection from the dead. On this Reformation Day, as on any other day, Jesus is all we need. Amen