

**+ Galatians 3:21-28 + We Are *Sola Fide* Sons of the Reformation! +
+ Seaway West Joint Reformation Service + Prince of Peace Ev. Lutheran Church – Fairport, NY +
+ 3 November 2013 +**

Why are we here today? Obviously we're here for a Joint Reformation Service, but why? We're celebrating the 496th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. So are we here for a history lesson? No. A celebration of the Reformation isn't complete without mentioning Dr. Martin Luther—the 16th century German theologian and pastor who in so many ways changed our world. His work on the German Bible established the modern German language. His use of the printing press to publish hundreds of writings changed how the world communicated. His efforts to reform the Christian church completely changed the Christian church as we know it. His courage to stand up to Roman pontiffs and secular rulers even had an impact on politics, philosophy, and culture. So are we here to praise one of the greatest historical figures in Western culture? No.

Are we here to celebrate our Lutheran heritage? After all, "Lutheran" is in the names of our congregations and our church body—the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We'll even have a potluck dinner afterwards, but no, that's not why we're here. Looking in your worship folder, you might even wonder if we're here to have a Latin lesson. The Latin words—*Sola Fide*—are in the theme of my sermon, but we're not here for that either.

So why are we here? We are here to celebrate. We are here to celebrate freedom, to celebrate life, to celebrate grace and unconditional forgiveness, to celebrate what our God has accomplished in the past and continues to accomplish even now. We are here because **WE ARE SOLA FIDE SONS OF THE REFORMATION**, and that's something worth celebrating!

When you look back on the history of Martin Luther's efforts to proclaim the Gospel in all its beautiful clarity, you might wonder, "What was it all about? Why did Luther do what he did?" It all boils down to this simple question—how am I saved? Luther's response was revolutionary because the church had strayed so far from Scripture's teaching. According to Scripture alone, I am saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone or to use the academic language of Luther's day, *Sola Scriptura—Sola Gratia—Sola Fide—Solutus Christus*. That answer is the heart of Lutheran teaching, but what makes that beautifully Scriptural answer so personal for us, even today, are the words *Sola Fide*. "By faith alone", I am saved.

You see, every single one of us has a natural inclination to do something that's impossible to do—earn God's favor. By nature, you and I think, "I have to do something for God to earn his favor. I have to do something to turn away God's anger against me or at least to do something about this guilt I feel. I have to do something to be saved. I have to do something..."

Yet where does that always lead? The ladder I keep trying to climb never ends, and the guilt never goes away. No matter how great my efforts to impress God with my generosity and charity and kindness, it never seems to be enough. Trying to convince myself that I'm not really that bad or at least not as bad as that hardened criminal sitting in a jail cell only works for so long before I go back to feeling my guilt again.

Even as Christians, we struggle with that natural desire to earn God's favor. "If I go to worship every Sunday, if I do this or that at church, then surely God will show me his favor." Or will he? The Apostle Paul personally fought with that natural inclination in himself, but he also spent an entire letter to the Christians in Galatia fighting for their souls.

They had heard the clear message of Christ crucified—his unconditional grace and boundless forgiveness. Paul had brought them that Gospel in the Word and in the waters of Holy Baptism freeing them from their guilt with real freedom in Christ, but there were some who came after Paul to lock the people back up again. "You need Jesus, but you also need to be circumcised. You need Jesus, but you also need to follow the kosher dietary laws and the ceremonial laws. You need Jesus, but you also need to obey."

It was insidious, because they were trying to make God's holy Law do something it was not meant to do. These teachers proclaimed a message of salvation by faith and works, a message that they would be justified or declared not guilty in God's sight by faith in Christ and by faithfully carrying out the works of God's holy Law. That was neither the purpose of God's holy Law nor the purpose of his Gospel message. Instead they had neither Law nor Gospel. Paul explains, "***For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.***"

Rather than *“impart life”*, the Law cuts and condemns and kills. The Law reveals sin for what it really is—a one-way ticket to eternal condemnation in hell. As one of our Lutheran forefathers once wrote, ***“The law excites sin and causes it to burst forth. In this way it makes sin into a tyrannical master over man... The law condemns all men with the intent that they give up their desire of earning their own righteousness before God.”***¹

The Law, therefore, does not justify. It does not declare righteous or innocent or not guilty before the holy God. It does not and cannot. Instead the Law imprisons. It confines. It guards. It directs us where we do not naturally want to go, yet it prepares us to hear the Gospel. In that way, the Law serves the Gospel. When the Law causes us to despair of ourselves and our own ability to save ourselves, then the Gospel takes over.

The Holy Spirit goes to work using the Gospel to create faith in our hearts. That good news of Jesus gives life to the dead. It brings freedom to souls held captive in the prison of sin and the custody of God’s holy Law. Because Christ has taken our punishment, we are declared not guilty by our holy God. It’s not any work of our own that accomplishes that, but Jesus Christ who has done it all for us all! That immeasurable grace is then ***“given through faith in Jesus Christ”***. Faith alone justifies you and me.

As important as it was for the Galatian Christians to hear that good news from the Apostle Paul, it’s just as vitally important for us today. That natural inclination still lives in every one of our hearts. “I just need to be good enough with God...” Sadly that desire to earn God’s favor is still alive and well in many areas of Christianity. Faith is seen as a means to an end—a work I have to do if I’m going to be right with God. Legalism makes human laws about everything and then places them on par with God’s holy will. Others burdened by such legalism throw off any regard for God’s holy will, and *Sola Fide* is quickly forgotten by those who claim to follow Luther today.

So the Apostle calls us back to remember why **WE ARE SOLA FIDE SONS OF THE REFORMATION**. ***“... The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...”*** We are justified by faith alone. It’s not something we’ve done, but something our gracious God has done for us. That’s one of the reasons we celebrate today, but that justification by faith alone also makes us ***“sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”***.

Now for you ladies out there, I realize that Paul’s words seem a little strange here. Why would he say, ***“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...”***? Did he misspeak? Was he just ignoring the women who would hear the reading of his letter? Scripture demonstrates that St. Paul had the highest regard for women, especially those who followed Christ. He didn’t misspeak either. So what’s Paul saying to all of us here?

Paul speaks of our status with God, not genders. The next verse makes that clear. ***“... For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”*** Through water and the Word, we become heirs of eternal life. We become ***“sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”***. In Holy Baptism, Jesus became our garment, our clothing, much like the white robe infants often wear when they are baptized. Dr. Luther described it beautifully, ***“To put on Christ according to the Gospel, therefore, is to put on, not the Law or works but an inestimable gift, namely, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, peace, comfort, joy in the Holy Spirit, salvation, life, and Christ Himself.”***²

That means God sees us differently. He sees what Jesus did, instead of what we did or failed to do. He sees us as rightful heirs to the inheritance of heaven through faith in Christ. As heirs standing before God through faith in Christ Jesus, our earthly distinctions don’t matter. ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** Instead of earthly distinctions, we are *sola fide* sons. We are *sola fide* heirs, and through faith in Christ, we are one in Christ. We are ***“sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”***, and that’s another reason to celebrate. As *sola fide* sons, we are also heirs of the Reformation.

Justification by faith alone is the central teaching of Holy Scripture and the teaching on which the Christian church stands or falls. For that clear teaching of Holy Scripture, the Apostle Paul and countless other believers

¹ John Ph. Koehler. *A Commentary on Galatians and Paul’s Rhapsody in Christ: A Commentary on Ephesians*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000. 93.

² Martin Luther. *Luther’s Works: Volume 26 – Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*. (eds. J.J. Pelikan, H.C. Oswald, & H.T. Lehmann). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963, 1999. 353.

contended even to the point of death. For that clear teaching of Holy Scripture—the one teaching that brings true freedom to sin-enslaved, Law-burdened souls—an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther was willing to stand up to Roman pontiffs and secular rulers and false teachers of every stripe. For that clear teaching of Holy Scripture, our Lutheran forefathers contended, crossing oceans and enduring all kinds of crosses to proclaim true freedom in Christ by faith alone. In this present age, we contend for the clear teaching of justification by faith alone for our own souls and for future generations that they may celebrate what God has accomplished for us all.

Many have lost that clear teaching of justification by faith alone, yet our gracious Lord has entrusted to our trembling hands and fumbling lips the task of proclaiming that message that we are justified by faith alone. That message changed our world when our gracious God declared us righteous in his sight through the death of his Son on the cross and his resurrection.

That message changed our world when our gracious God led Dr. Luther to finally realize that we are declared righteous by faith alone in Christ Jesus. That message changed our lives when our gracious God called us from the darkness of unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. That message continues to change our world one soul at a time and will to the end. **WE ARE SOLA FIDE SONS OF THE REFORMATION.** What a reason to celebrate! What a message to share! What a gift of God's indescribable grace! Amen.