

“Saved by Grace Through Faith”

Sunday October 26, 2025

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Reformation Sunday

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Reformation Sunday is always a good day to address some of the rumors and misunderstandings that we might have about the Roman Catholic Church. And since the newly elected pope, Leo the XIV, is a guy from Chicago, it is even more timely to discuss these ideas.

In 1999, 26 years ago, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church approved a document called The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, or the JDDJ for short. This declaration states that both churches share a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Does that surprise you? Sometimes folks want to look at the Catholic Church and criticize its emphasis on good works, but I don’t know if that is theologically accurate. But the Lutheran and Catholics Churches believe that good works are an important part of a vibrant faith. Our understanding of vocation and sanctification might be different from that of the Catholic Church, but we both believe that we are justified by our faith in Jesus through God’s grace.

Another thing that our churches agree on, in general, is the idea that humankind exists in a permanent state of brokenness. There is no “universal” Christian answer to the question of whether or not humanity is “good.” It all depends on whom you ask. It depends on which faith tradition you ask. Theologians from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Menno Simons and to Mother Theresa would each tell you something slightly different.

Our scripture readings for today acknowledge that humanity still needs help in the sin department. Paul writes, *For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* And the gospel writer John reports Jesus’ words: *Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.* Those are condemning words, aren’t they? They don’t exactly affirm the goodness of humanity, and that hurts. We would like to believe that we are good people at heart, right?

In today’s culture, we want to see ourselves in a positive light. What’s the title of that well-known book, *When Bad Things Happen to...* Good people, right? The book wouldn’t sell if the title were “*When Bad Things Happen to Bad People*,” because people don’t want to believe that they are bad.

Deep down, no one wants to believe that we are a disappointment to God. We don’t want to put ourselves in the same category as those who commit horrible crimes or those who break the law. No, we want to see ourselves as good people. But the truth is inescapable. We are indeed captive to sin and we cannot free ourselves. The apostle Paul, in Chapter 7 of Romans, confesses what we feel deep inside when he writes: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* I can relate to his frustration and I’m sure you can, too.

Since Paul penned those words almost two thousand years ago, humankind has struggled to come to terms with our imperfections, our weaknesses, and our propensity to sin. Martin Luther’s lifelong struggle with the church had the issue of sin at its core. He struggled with it

personally until he was able to find God's grace in Scripture that was available to all through faith. He struggled with the power of sin as he saw it at work in the institutional church.

Luther's ideas were not really new ones. They were part of an ongoing renewal of the church that was part of the medieval world. John Wyclif in England in the 14th century and Jan Hus in Bohemia in the 15th century each wrote and published their own critiques of the church. But they were in the wrong places at the wrong time, and they lost their lives for their outspoken critique.

Take a look around today. Sin has not gone away. We see it in our personal struggles and we see it in institutions and systems that are part of our daily lives. We see sin entering our relationships and our communities. It's not that we don't try to do right by others—we try very hard to build strong relationships and to be the best spouse, sibling, or child we can be, and yet we say and do things that hurt other people. We know right from wrong and yet we often do what's wrong or harmful, and sometimes we don't regret it. Sin is part of a vicious cycle that we can't ever seem to get out of.

But you know what, friends? There is good news in our weakness. The sin that we share is what connects us with the rest of humanity—it is what makes us human. Sin is a universal human condition, and God knows that we struggle with it on a daily basis. God knows our thoughts, our temptations, our vices, and our failures. And yet, God is not afraid to look at us and see us for who we really are. God is not afraid to love us, in spite of who we really are.

The good news for us today and always is that we have a God who looks past our sinful side, and sees in us a people worthy of God's own salvation. We have a God of Re-formation, one who re-forms us on a daily basis. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is living proof, from God, that sin and death do not have the final word. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, God raises us to new life, re-creates in us a new heart, and enables us to turn away from our old habits.

On this Reformation Day we celebrate that sin does not have last word in our lives. Today we celebrate that God can take what is corrupt and restore it. God can take what was broken and make it whole. God can take systems in society and re-create them to benefit all. God can restore dignity to the outcast, grant health and healing to the broken, and bring wholeness to the suffering. With the help of our living, loving God, we are always being made new. And to that life-giving message, let us all say, "Thanks be to God." **Amen.**