



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**Reformation Sunday: October 27, 2019**

**Sermon Title: "Gifts"**

**Gospel Text: John 8:31-36**

Reformation Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays of the Church Year because it is a day filled with gifts. This sea of red I see throughout this sanctuary is a gift, because red is the color associated with the Holy Spirit, and so red reminds us that God continues to be an active presence within the Church and within each of our lives. Another great gift of Reformation Sunday is the rich music we hear today. I especially treasure the old Reformation-era hymns written by Luther. We are blessed with several of them today. And finally, as an extra bonus here at Grace Lutheran, this day features the gifts that so many of our members have lovingly made: these quilts and kits that will be distributed to people in need all around the world.

Any day filled with so many gifts is a day to remember, right? I mean, who doesn't like receiving gifts? Actually, the more I think about it, I suppose we can all remember a clunker of a gift we've either given or received. My wife Linda frequently reminds me of a clunker I gave her. It was quite a few years ago, just when digital cameras were becoming the rage. I like technology and photography – and so I thought getting her a digital camera for her birthday would be one of the best gifts ever. But I'll never forget when she opened it. I stood there with a big smile, waiting for her joyous reaction. Instead, she looked at me with a mixture of confusion and disappointment and said, "What am I supposed to do with THIS? You know I don't know how to work these things. You really bought this for yourself, didn't you!" I assured her *then*, as I assure you *now*, I really didn't intend for *her* birthday gift to be a present for *me*. And for what it's worth, she got me back on *my* birthday when she presented me with a brand new dish scrubber kitchen brush...

And so maybe not *every* gift is appreciated, because there are certain gifts we just don't think we need. That's the situation in today's Gospel lesson. It all began early in the morning, at the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus was teaching the people when the scribes and Pharisees showed up and started sparring with Jesus over a wide range of issues, including the nature of forgiveness and what it means to be a messiah. Jesus was clearly getting the better of the argument, because we read in the verse preceding today's Gospel that "many believed in him."

And so, to those new believers, Jesus offered a priceless gift. "Abide in my word." In other words, rest in comfort, peace, and assurance in the things I am teaching you and the promises I am making. Because it will lead you to *truth*, and the *truth* will make you *free*.

It seems like such a wonderful gift, but it was received by those new believers with as little enthusiasm as Linda showed for that digital camera I bought her so many years ago. "Freedom? What do we need with freedom? We aren't slaves. Don't you know who we are

Jesus? We are the descendants of Abraham! We've never been slaves!" In other words, "Thanks for the gift Jesus, but no thanks. We don't need your freedom."

Reformation Sunday is an opportune time to evaluate the state of Christ's Church, and in my view it's not all that different from the scene that played out in the Temple in this lesson. Our world today is filled with people who don't think Jesus has anything of value to offer them. "Thanks for the grace, mercy, and forgiveness Jesus, but I'm good. I don't need it." After all, who needs a savior when you're convinced that you've got everything handled, both here on earth and for time and all eternity? And who needs mercy and forgiveness if you are convinced that you're a pretty decent person because you haven't killed anyone or robbed a bank?

But in fact we aren't nearly as free as we think we are. We are slaves to our appetites and passions. We are slaves to sin too. Maybe it's not really big, notorious sins – the kind that make the newspaper headlines – but in a million small but significant ways we fail to appropriately and adequately keep the two great commandments to *love God* and *love our neighbor*. There are plenty of sins out there that may be more noteworthy or scandalous, but in the end, sin is sin and we all fall short. The new believers in our Gospel lesson were living in a similar state of self-deception. For starters, the descendants of Abraham had in fact been slaves – in Egypt – and now they were under the domineering thumb of the entire Roman Empire. But more importantly, *they were* – like *we are* – slaves to sin. They needed freedom just as much as we do.

This freedom Jesus offers is forgiveness... eternal life... and peace in this world that can give us the calmness and assurance that enables us to rise above the stresses and anxiety of this life so that we can stop fixating on our own self-centered needs, wants, and worries, and care instead for our neighbor. Jesus is offering us a free gift of infinite value, beyond any earthly price tag. And that gift is at the heart of *today's Gospel* as well as the *Reformation itself*. We can quite simply summarize it like this: we are sinners who cannot, by our own merits, earn salvation, but through faith in Jesus Christ receive forgiveness and eternal life through the gift of Christ's righteousness. Clothed in that righteousness, we can, in the midst of life's storms, cling to the promise of eternal life, and enjoy lives that are marked by peace, holiness, and wholeness.

This sounds like a gift that everyone would be lined up around the block to receive, don't you agree? Well, as I noted earlier, not everyone has come to the realization in their lives that they need that gift. Still others may desire and even crave that gift of love but still hold back from receiving it in its fullness. Why? Well, I think we are hesitant to embrace Jesus's gift of grace and love for many of the same reasons we're sometimes hesitant to accept even the most desirable of gifts from other people.

For example, we sometimes resist accepting a gift because we suspect that there are strings attached, like an expectation that we'll *return* a favor or gift that's at least as valuable as the one received. But Christ envelopes us in his love and righteousness with full knowledge that we have nothing of value to offer in return. When Martin Luther died, they found a piece of paper in his pocket on which he had written, "We are all beggars." Luther was right. And Jesus knows that. But he loves us anyway. Open your heart to that love.

Another reason we resist gifts from others is because a gift creates a connection which can make you feel vulnerable. Maybe this explains those times when you've distanced yourself from Jesus. Do you fear that engaging Jesus at even a superficial level might reveal your unworthiness, your brokenness, and your secrets? Jesus already knows them. But he loves us anyway. He comes to us wherever we are. But as the saying goes, he loves us too much to leave us there. Through his love, Jesus will transform you. Open your heart to that love.

And so here we are - Reformation Sunday – a day of gifts, including these blankets and kits that will soon travel around the globe. Linda's birthday is next week, and I need to up my game. So pray for me... and her. The greatest gift of all though is Jesus himself, who invites us to linger in his word, become his followers, and experience his truth – a truth that will free us from everything that desires to dominate, distract, divide, and destroy us. Be at peace, dear friends, be at peace in the gift of Jesus Christ. Amen.