

The Festival of the Reformation
October 25, 2020
Stewardship: A Way of Life, Week 4
Romans 3:19-28

“Stewardship in the World”

It was three years ago in 2017 that we observed the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with special commemorations, worship services, concerts, and other happenings. There were events throughout the world that lifted up the many contributions of Dr. Martin Luther in matters of faith, education, culture, politics, language, and more. And it all began with a simple call to scholarly debate. That’s what Luther thought he was doing on October 31, 1517, when he nailed his 95 Theses, his points of disputation and disagreement with the church of his day, to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Little did Luther know that his 95 Theses would ignite a much wider response that led to what we call the Reformation movement of the sixteenth century. Today, we would say that this went viral as sixteenth-century communication blew up with what followed. Luther’s wrestling with Scripture and his own conscience touched off what would become a matter of stewardship not just for the individual, but for the world. This stewardship of central truths of faith would lead to the “Three Solas”; namely, that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, made known in holy Scripture alone. Grace alone – Faith alone – Scripture alone. And now here we are, three years after the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, in the midst of a pandemic, talking about stewardship in the world. Is this even relevant to our situation today? Aren’t there more pressing matters before us like the coronavirus, the presidential election, and a host of other concerns? There will always be such things before us, and yet, when all is said and done, at the end of the day, at the end of our life, at the end of the world, this saving truth rings out loud and clear: **“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”** (Romans 3:23-25a). This is the timeless truth that speaks to the hearts and minds of people in every generation. It speaks to us today. On this Reformation Sunday as our 4-week series on Christian stewardship concludes, based on that Epistle lesson, the theme for preaching is “Stewardship in the World.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Here in America, our Reformation celebration on October 31 has always struggled with Halloween being on the same day. I mean, how can you compete with fun costumes, trick-or-treating, and parties? Long ago, Lutherans wisely chose to move this observance to the last Sunday in October, and so we do today. By way of review, our month-long fall stewardship series, “Stewardship – A Way of Life,” has focused on home and family, congregation, and community. Today, on Reformation Sunday, we look at the big picture of the world. What does stewardship in the world look like? Like Luther, we may think we are quite small and insignificant. What could I possibly contribute to the world at-large? And yet, based on that solid foundation of the truth of God’s Word that we have all sinned and fall short of God’s glory, and that we are justified by his grace as a gift through the cleansing blood of Jesus – that will have impact. Like a stone that is tossed into the still waters of a pond, those ripples go out much farther than we would ever think. In our stewardship video for this week, we will hear from individuals in our congregation about what it means to serve in the military in other parts of the world, and the connection to faith. We will hear from individuals about the good being done in Jesus’ Name in poverty-stricken areas of our world. We will hear from missionaries around the globe who are sharing the good news of Jesus and who are sponsored by our congregation. All of these individuals, fellow believers, are exercising stewardship in the world and, like each one of us, holding fast to what really matters: Grace alone – Faith alone – Scripture alone.

When we look at the world today and compare it with the world of Luther's day, we may shake our heads in amazement. So much has happened over the last 500 years: amazing discoveries and breakthroughs in science, medicine, industry, technology, and other areas that have blessed our lives in ways that our ancestors could not have imagined. But the last 500 years have also been marked by devastating warfare and destruction; intolerance and prejudice that have created whole systems of inequality and poverty; ravenous greed and materialism that have choked out life. What will be the legacy of this present generation's stewardship of the world? What will future generations say of us? Will they rise up to praise this generation for its foresight and wisdom that have brought about blessing? Or will they condemn us for shortsighted and self-centered decisions that have cursed those who come after us? Will our legacy of Grace alone – Faith alone – Scripture alone be forgotten amidst the troubles of this world? There is costly grace and there is cheap grace. Costly grace receives with humble repentance and thanksgiving the gift of salvation that cost Jesus his very life, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament strives to conform our own lives to Jesus. Cheap grace, as its name implies, is a degraded and devalued imitation of Jesus' sacrifice. How could we ever think that what cost Jesus his very life would come cheap to us? As Luther has said: "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

Lutheran theology makes a sharp distinction between Law and Gospel. The Law is exactly this: **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23). The Law exposes the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do. The hammer of God's righteous judgment condemns our sin and disobedience; our failure to love God and our neighbor. We can only kneel in humble repentance before God our Maker and Redeemer, saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The Law says, "Do," but we can never do it. We can never live up to what God calls us to do. But this is not the final word. The Law must give way to the Gospel, which says, "Done." All the demands of God's Law have been done not by you or me, but by Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. This is what we read in that Epistle lesson: **"[We] 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"** (Romans 3:24-25a). Jesus lived that life of full obedience to the Father's will, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves, fulfilling all righteousness. Jesus also died the death that we rightly deserved because of our sin and disobedience, taking that punishment upon himself on the tree of the cross. Here is good news for all: **"The blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses us from all sin"** (1 John 1:7b). Not some sins, but all sins. In Jesus, we have been set free. All that Jesus has done comes to us as a free gift. We do not earn or deserve this; it is received only by faith. This is the good news that makes an eternal difference.

Our stewardship in the world is exactly what we hear in today's first Scripture reading: **"Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people"** (Revelation 14:6). This is our calling in Christ until Christ shall come again: to make this good news known to all people. God's desire is that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), and so through stewardship of our selves, our time, and our possessions we work together for the sake of Christ's mission to the world. That is stewardship in the world that leads to joy and blessing not only in this life, but in the life to come. It is as the old saying goes, sometimes engraved on gravestones in cemeteries: "Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

As we look to the future post-COVID, we may find that stewardship in the world may look very different from what it was previously. Things will likely be different going forward. But the truth remains: we worship and serve a changeless Christ for a changing world. May the Lord create in us a deeper appreciation for this precious heritage of faith that has been passed down to us from those who have gone before us while we strive to manage faithfully God's gifts entrusted to our care. Amen.