



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Reformation Sunday Celebration

October 29, 2017

“Christ Alone”

(Hebrews 12:2)

Rev. David K. Groth

500th Anniversary of the Reformation, 2017

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Hebrews 12:2).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever **Amen.**

Johann Tetzel was a short, plump stump preacher who was very good at the business of selling indulgences. But his biggest break came in the fall of 1517 when Pope Leo X authorized him to preach a special, plenary indulgence in Germany. Here's how it worked. In exchange for cold, hard cash, the indulgence promised to wipe away all sins committed since Baptism and free souls from the agony of purgatory. The proceeds were designated for the construction of St. Peter's basilica in Rome and for the paying down of Pope Leo's debts.

The mission was planned with care. Publicity preceded Tetzel in town after town. People were expecting him. His entourage was impressive: horsemen bearing arms, drummers pounding out cadences, trumpeters announcing the arrival of something important, flags bearing symbols of the pope. A copy of the prized indulgence was attached to a cross and raised high for all to see.

Then it was Tetzel's turn, and he preached the same sermon in hundreds of villages. "Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance'? And you will not?" Finally there was the appeal: "Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul safely and securely in to the homeland of paradise?" On his wagon was a money chest. (I actually saw Tetzel's money chest at the Luther exhibit in the twin cities last year. It's made of iron, has three rugged padlocks on it, and a fastened bowl on top which received the coinage with a slot leading directly into the chest.) He also had a

scale to make certain that people's coins were good, and an ample supply of blank indulgences. The scribes were all ready and in their places. Then came Tetzel's last exhortation: "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!" The transactions were finished with well rehearsed efficiency, and in short order the entourage was on its way to the next town.

The practice raised many an eyebrow, and there was some quiet grumbling among the people. Some German princes called it "Roman bloodsucking." But Tetzel had the hide of a rhinoceros, and was accustomed to mild opposition. And so the sales went on.

500 years ago today, Tetzel was working the towns less than 20 miles northeast of Wittenberg. A young university professor was there by the name of Martin Luther. As a professor he had taken an oath to teach the truth and expose error. As a pastor he was concerned for the souls of his parishioners. So he didn't like this business of indulgences one little bit. If the pope had this power to grant remission of sins even to the dead, why doesn't he just do it for free? Luther posted 95 theses against the sale of indulgences. The theses themselves were composed in Latin. He was aiming for a healthy debate among clergy and professors. But they were quickly translated into German and were circulated all over Germany. Luther's protest was so effective that even today the very word *indulgence* almost carries with it the stench of the devil (See Kittelson, "Luther the Reformer", pp. 101ff).

Tetzel's enthusiastic crowds soon contained substantial numbers of hecklers. His sales plummeted, and his mission was ruined. The sudden storm of opposition he faced now differed from the normal complaints because Luther was different. He was smart, courageous, stubborn as all get out, articulate. Luther condemned the indulgence theology with what would become customary bluntness: "All those who consider themselves secure in their salvation through letters of indulgence will be eternally damned, as will their teachers" (Quoted from Kittelson, p. 107). Either

our salvation comes through Christ alone, or it doesn't come at all. In Isaiah 42, God says, "I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise with carved idols" (v. 8) insert there, "or with the pope's printed indulgences".

With the 95 theses, Luther begins what would become a life-long work of redirecting people to Christ alone. Christ alone rather than their own good works, or indulgences, or relics or papal decrees, or pilgrimages or intercessions of the saints. We don't approach Christ with a divided heart. We don't give Jesus 50% of the credit for our salvation, or 75% or 99%. To Jesus alone be the glory for our salvation. Friends, if an individual is saved, it is by Christ alone. There can be no patchwork. Christ did it all and will not be helped in the matter. Salvation is by Christ alone. So long as you cling to your works, or to any hope other than Jesus for eternal life, you are in great danger. Only in Christ alone are you safe. "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16). That's the promise of Jesus and it will never fail you.

A number of weeks ago, we started out with grace alone, and then we went to faith alone. Last week we considered scripture alone. And once you accept the Bible's authority, you'll notice that it points to Christ alone, for all the prophets testify about him (Acts 10:43).

That's why Paul wrote, "I resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). That is, it's still all about Jesus. It's still all about Jesus.

But here's the rub: a person wouldn't necessarily know that if he looked at your life. We don't pray to Jesus as we should . . . unless the need is acute, and then we storm the gates of heaven. But the Bible says we should pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:16-18). We don't praise him or thank him as he deserves, but rather attribute the blessings he gives to our own cleverness and hard work. We don't confess him out there in our public lives, mostly because we are ashamed to do so. But Jesus said, "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed

when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk. 8:38). We skimp on our offerings, while splurging on just about everything else. But Jesus warned, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21).

It’s still all about Jesus. We nod our heads in approval, but our lives preach a different message. Paul wrote, “Christ is all” (Col. 3:11), so don’t make this world your all, “where moth and rust destroys and where thieves break in and steal” (Mt. 6:19). If Christ is your all, then your treasure will never be gone. It will never be destroyed or taken away, for he will never leave you, or forsake you.

What does a life look like that is all about Jesus? Johann Sebastian Bach wrote, “The main purpose of my music is to glorify God. . . My music comes from my heart as a humble offering to God.” So when he would set out to compose, at the top of the page he would write two letters J.J. They are abbreviations for the Latin, *Jesu Juva* (which means, *Jesus Help Me!*). When he was finally satisfied with a piece, he would write at the bottom of the score: *SDG, Soli Deo Gloria*, “to God alone be the glory”. How can you follow Bach’s example? How can you make your work and your life about Christ alone? Paul told the Corinthians, “Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Why? Because salvation was won for us by Christ alone. And you (!) by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, through faith, have been saved.

“But I don’t have strong faith”, you say. Never mind that. We are saved by Christ alone.

“But I have many doubts.” Don’t fixate on your doubts. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith (Heb. 12:2).

“But I don’t love him enough!” It’s not your love that is the big deal. “This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10).

“But I’m not good enough!” Who of us is? “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom.

3:23). Beggars know that the more tattered their clothing, the better the results. It is the same with respect to the Gospel. Don't put on any airs before God. You come just as you are to this altar, a poor, miserable sinner, so he can wash you clean with his blood and clothe you with his righteousness.

“But I don't feel like I fit in here. People don't know me, I don't have any money, or even a drop of German Lutheran blood in me.” Doesn't matter. The Gospel is blind to your ethnicity or your socio-economic status. “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

“But I don't even like some of the things Jesus said.” Get over it. Neither do I. “But while we were still enemies of God, Christ died for us.”

“But I still feel so guilty and ashamed.” You don't need to, for “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

“But my life is a wreck.” Join the club. Not once have I met a well-adjusted person. By nature we're all dysfunctional sinners and under the curse of death. Or as the painter Francis Bacon said, “We are all potential carcasses.” But Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

Christ alone, because “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Christ alone, because Luther wasn't crucified for you, nor were your parents or ancestors.

Christ alone, for “there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

Christ alone, because the Father said, “This is my Son. Listen to him!”

Christ alone, for “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9).

Christ alone, for “salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Christ alone. You see, even on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it's still all about Jesus. It's not really about Luther or Melanchthon or Chemnitz. It's not about the printing press, or the German language, or the 95 theses. And it's certainly not about Johann Tetzel or Leo X or indulgences or St. Peter's Basilica. The Reformation and our celebration of it is still all about Jesus. Christ Alone! Thanks be to God!

