

Luther Week #2
Saved By Grace Through Faith
Luke 15: 11-32
November 12, 2017

We just passed the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and in honor of this significant milestone, Pastor Abby and I are preaching through four significant Reformation themes. Last week Pastor Abby shared Luther's belief about the human condition, that each of us are simultaneously a saint and a sinner. This week I'll be talking about the theological insight that changed Luther's life and then sent him out with a passion that sparked a revolution and changed the world: the insight is that we are "saved by grace through faith alone."

I love hearing the stories that shape people's beliefs and actions. Martin Luther has a great story, a heartbreaking story, a story that leads to the theology he constructs. Even though we are stepping into a medieval life and time, I hope we can hear some of the connections between Martin Luther's life and ours.

First, Luther had a difficult relationship with his parents and his father in particular. His parents were very severe and, as an adult, Luther complained about the punishments he suffered. His father was a miner who became the owner of several foundries. He decided that he wanted his son to be a lawyer and provided the education young Martin needed for a career in law.

However, at age 21, Luther enters the monastery, motivated by a concern for his own salvation. Martin Luther gets caught outside in a thunderstorm and he is so overwhelmed by the fear of death and suffering eternal punishment in hell, that he makes a bargain with St. Anne, mother of Mary, that he will enter the monastery if he makes it through the thunderstorm alive. (Many clergy make bargains like these). St. Anne comes through for Luther, and he enters the monastery. His father is furious, but Luther is more concerned with his relationship with another parental figure.

Luther's relationship with God wasn't much better than his relationship with his parents. His image of God was shaped by his experience of his parents. Scholars say that Luther was

searching for a gracious God rather than a God of judgment. Luther thought God was a severe judge, like his own father, like teachers he had who punished him too. Luther was searching for an experience like the prodigal son has in our story from Luke. An experience of unconditional grace, like a parent who knows of a child's waywardness and loves them anyway, and is waiting to offer grace when the child is ready for it.

Luther's life isn't like the life of the prodigal son in our story for today. He just feels like it is. In the monastery, the way to forgiveness was through going to confession, confessing your sins to a confessor and receiving absolution. Luther went to confession obsessively, convinced he had to confess every sin in order to be absolved and avoid eternal punishment when he died. He was afraid that he might forget to confess a sin and that overlooking that sin would be the one mistake that would seal his eternal fate. His confessors told him to relax, to lighten up, to come back when he had something good to confess. The church provided a means to salvation, a path to clear the conscience, but it didn't work for Luther. He was still tormented, worried about his eternal fate.

We may chuckle a little at Luther's obsessive nature, but I hope we can step into his predicament. I'm someone who wrestles with anxiety from time to time. I've had periods of multiple weeks where I've had a spinning in my stomach that won't let go. As a youth grades made me very anxious. I would study for tests obsessively, afraid that I would make a mistake, afraid I would miss something, afraid that if I didn't get an A it meant that I wasn't smart, it was a visible sign that I was falling behind my peers, and that I wouldn't have a future. I majored in trombone in college and I brought the same anxiety and fear to my practicing and performances. I was not just afraid of my mistakes, I was afraid of what they said about me and my worth. The harder I worked to try to eliminate them, the more mistakes I discovered.

Luther felt this sort of intensity and more in regards to the fate of his eternal soul. This may be hard to imagine because the fate of our eternal soul is generally not a burning concern in liberal American college towns, but this was the concern in Luther's time. Luther was a tormented young man going through a crisis of faith with the biggest stakes imaginable..

His confessor took the surprising step of suggesting that Luther begin teaching scripture at the new University in Wittenberg. As Luther prepared lectures on the Bible, he dove into the scriptures trying to solve his theological problem and looking for a gracious God.

He found his answer in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans where Paul writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

It took some time, but this verse changed Luther's whole perspective. He came to believe that we don't earn our salvation, or work out our salvation, through the works of the law, whether that means following the law perfectly, which we can't do, or through the practice of confession and absolution. Rather, we are saved by God's grace, the gift of God reconciling the world to God's self through Christ, and we know this through faith. Faith, or trust, isn't something we have to do either, this is a gift of God too. For Luther, we receive these gifts through the Word of God, the Bible.

In the essay "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther says, "...the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it...For example, the commandment, "You shall not covet" is a command which proves us all to be sinners, for no one can avoid coveting no matter how much he may struggle against it...Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying "if you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you."

If you have ever had an experience where the anxiety lifts, the depression loses its grip, a door suddenly opens when everything was closed, this is what happens to Luther. This shift in perspective, changed Luther's life. He received the gift of a heart at ease, of trusting that he was ok, that he had found a God like that father in the story of the prodigal, who is waiting and watching, ready to offer that gift of grace, when the child is ready for it. Luther said, "I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened."

One of the phrases that comes out of the reformation, out of Luther's struggle is that "we are saved by grace through faith alone." In other words, we do not earn salvation, because of what we do, but through the unearned grace of God.

Salvation here is really about the healing of the human heart: trusting that we have worth as a human being and trusting that as we face the ultimate questions around life and death that we will be ok, that we belong in all things to a gracious God.

Doing more, working harder, trying to be perfect, obsessively following all the rules, trying to measure up to all of these external measures of success, trying to impress others, will not heal the human heart. The human heart is healed by grace, and gift. The human heart is healed, not by what we do, but by faith in, trusting, who we are. We are children of a gracious God. We have worth, no matter what. We are invited to surrender to this good news, to let go, and see how this changes our lives.

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich recast Luther's theology into more modern language and categories. He gave a famous sermon titled, "You Are Accepted" where he talks about grace and the transformation of the heart. He writes this (it is a long paragraph), *"We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. It happens; or it does not happen. And it certainly does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted. Accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace."*

We want all at First UCC to know that you are accepted and beloved by that which is greater than you. We want people here to grow in trust of this grace, to be encountering this good news over and over again, sinking into it and surrendering to it because this grace of God that heals the heart. This gift changes us and leads us to live with great freedom and joy. May it be so. Amen.