

October 30 – Reformation Sunday –  
*sola fide*, faith alone

About 500 years ago, a Roman Catholic monk was feeling terribly alienated from God -- crushed by his own sinfulness -- and was trying to find some way to ease the pressure. He did more and more good works, but discovered that he could never do enough to save himself. He tried confession, but the problem was that he could never be sure that he had confessed everything. When he realized that his entire self was in need of forgiveness, he came right up to the edge of despair.

Then this monk studied the Scriptures, and when he got to Paul's letter to the Romans, experienced a breakthrough. He discovered that the God who judged him for his sins was the same God who graciously sent Jesus Christ to save him from his sins. The way to be saved, then, was somehow to GRASP Christ; and that only one thing was capable of grasping Christ: faith. Faith alone. Or, in the original words of this monk named Martin Luther: *sola fide*. When Luther the monk went public with this breakthrough, he started the Protestant Reformation. "Faith alone" became a slogan of this movement which sought to re-form the Christian church.

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The reformation's beginning is symbolized by that picture of Luther nailing the 95 theses to the church door.

A stamp collector told his teen-aged son that there is a Martin Luther stamp. His son asked "Do you have to nail it to the envelope?"

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Our reading from Romans 3 today is a foundation Scripture for "faith alone". Paul argues that keeping the Old Testament Law does not put people right with God. Paul asserted that we could not be justified by the law because its purpose is to define sin, to teach us that *Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

He then states what *does* put us right with God: *We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone, no matter who we are.* -- "The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe"

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Faith was the key to Luther. In his own study of the Bible, he discovered that faith is essential to a relationship with God. "*We are saved by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ,*" as Paul

proclaimed. Faith is the attitude that enables us to hang on to Christ; it is the way we gain access to the saving grace of God. Faith is best defined as "trust," -- a willingness to rely on Jesus through all the challenges of life.

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Luther's experience is not your experience. But maybe one of you came to church, not knowing whether you ought to be here or not. After all, you have secrets. You've done things you should not have. Some Sundays everyone else looks so close to God, so near to getting it right. But maybe you're like the young Luther and feel far off from God.

Distant. When it comes time for prayer, you don't know which words to use.

If this Sunday finds you empty, silent, distant, needy - rejoice. This church, these hymns, this gathered congregation, these words of Scripture, this sermon is for you. Come, hold out your empty hands to receive the gift. We call it grace: God's unconditional love,

forgiveness, acceptance.

Don't worry about what you ought to say to God. Listen for what God has to say to you.

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Let me paraphrase a parable of Jesus: A sinner, a big-time one, walked into the back of a church one day. He knew his sinfulness so he prayed, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' and his prayer was granted. He left justified that day."

But some object: "Go on. Tell us the rest of the story."

Jesus replied: "That's it. Sinner sought mercy and it was granted. End of story."

They still don't get it. "Now, come on, Jesus. What's the rest of the story? How long before he went back to sinning? How did he make retribution for the sins he committed? "Jesus, we've read your Gospel. You don't just forgive a person, they must respond - start giving to the poor, something. Tell us the rest of the story."

But that was the whole story. As Paul wrote: We are now *justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.*

Grace, *God's undeserved kindness and mercy*, is a tricky thing for people who experienced it long ago and have since forgotten what it is. We are certain - and we are right - that grace inspires a response. Jesus spends lots of time teaching us, showing us, commanding us to live a faithful life. He makes it clear that once he has granted us his mercy and we accept his call to follow, we are not able to return to the life we had before. But our response is voluntary - it's up to you. He won't force you. The Lord's acceptance and forgiveness is a free gift - no strings attached. He expects a response, but it's not a condition for the gift.

We are saved by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ, for works of love.

*"We are saved by faith alone, but not by the faith that is alone."*

We can know forgiveness and also transformation from the inside out -- power to walk in faithfulness with the Lord.

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A few years after the reformation had begun, in 1521, Martin Luther was put on trial by the Roman Catholic Church. He had been severely critical of the pope, questioning the validity of some of the sacraments and denouncing church corruption.

An archbishop was given the job of examining Luther, and he asked him, "Brother Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? ... You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith. ... I ask you, Martin do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

Luther replied, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason — I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other — *my conscience is captive to the Word of God*. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe."

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There is an old joke about three clergy who were debating a theological point with one another at the local ministerial association meeting. The Catholic priest began his argument with, "The pope's latest encyclical clearly teaches that..." Not to be outdone, the Baptist minister thundered, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." And finally,

the Lutheran said, "Well, it's always seemed to me..."

For Lutherans, finally the answer is that you should follow your conscience. You have to make up your own mind – hopefully relying on scripture. The church can't – and won't – give you an answer to every question.

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In the years after the beginning of the reformation, there had been a measure of religious tolerance, and the princes of several of the states in the empire had actually *encouraged* the reform movement in the churches in their jurisdictions.

Finally in 1529, more than a decade after the reformation began, the emperor called a council of the religious and political leaders to deal with the growing rebellion against the established church.

Emperor Charles V, who had never been a supporter of the reformers, announced that he would no longer tolerate disobedience. They quickly moved to reinstate previous sanctions against Luther and to outlaw the changes he and others had proposed.

But several of the princes and representatives, citing freedom of conscience, joined together to present *a written protest against the emperor's action*. They sent their "Protestation" to the emperor, who responded by having the bearers of the document tossed in prison.

In the nomenclature of that time and place, that protest document was called *Protestatio*, and hence, *the entire group of reformers came to be branded "Protestants."*

Thus, we who belong to any of the denominations that have sprung from the Reformation *have our beginnings in a protest movement*.

So how do you feel about being linked historically to a protest?

Was their protest movement like "Occupy Wall Street" or the Tea Party? -- chanting and in-your-face demonstrations?

No, in the 16th century, protest was understood in a different sense than it is today and more in terms of being *a positive witness*. So the reformation protest consisted largely of academic debates, books and pamphlets.

Indeed, the reformers understood themselves as witnessing to the authority of Scripture, to the idea that every person could pray directly to God on his or her own behalf, and to the Bible truth that we are saved by grace through faith and not what we do.

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So what's the message for us on this Reformation Sunday?

Simply this: We belong to a movement born to witness to the positive power of faith in Jesus Christ. "Faith alone".

Faith is **accepting the judgment of law**: "*You are a sinner.*" and **hearing the gospel**, the word of grace: "*Because you are a sinner, Christ is **for you.***"

Salvation is **by grace** - the **gift** of God -

**Received** by **faith** - *trusting God's promises* -

Faith in Jesus Christ and His Word.