

Reformation Festival
October 27, 2024
Pastor Jasper Sellnow

Three sermonettes on:
the Gospel in Word & Sacrament

The Word: Romans 10:8-17

Communion: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Baptism: Titus 3:3-7



In 1524, the Reformation of the church was underway. And the stakes could not have been higher... because the gospel was at stake. Are people forgiven by God for the sake of Christ alone or not? If not, the church would not have news that anyone could call good. Nor would it have the truth.

Sadly, for centuries the truth of the gospel, the good news that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone... this gospel had been obscured by the church itself... and for many it had been not just hidden but lost entirely. Luther sought to restore it. And one of the best ways to do that was through song.

Martin Luther was not only a gift from God when it came to his intellectual prowess and theological acumen, but also when it came to his musical abilities. He was a gifted writer of both tune and text and contributed dozens of hymns to our cherished Lutheran hymnody heritage. This includes four of the eight hymns that made up the very first Lutheran hymnal which was released 500 years ago in 1524.

Luther understood that when wedded together, tune and text can tie themselves not just to one another but to the hearts of God's people. And so he wanted hymns that sang the truth of God's Word. Hymns that sounded the depths of God's saving grace. Hymns that were not only filled with praise for God but explained exactly why we were praising him in the first place.

And faithful Christians in the Lutheran church have followed suit in the centuries that have followed. You can tell when a hymn is written by a Lutheran. It focuses on our sinful condition, God's saving work in Christ, and his work in the Means of Grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacrament – to deliver the saving benefits to us. This is what sets Lutheran hymnody apart from other Christian hymns. A clear and consistent focus on the good news of Jesus delivered in the Word, in Communion, and in Baptism.

Today, as we thank God for his work done through the Reformers 500 years ago, we will consider that treasure of the gospel in Word and Sacrament. We'll do that with three brief meditations on God's Word and three brief hymns that do what songs written by Lutherans do best: proclaim the gospel.

And proclaiming the gospel is what our first reading from God's Word today is all about. God inspired St. Paul to record words that not only remind us of the treasure of the gospel, but of our responsibility to confess it... to share it... to sing it and shout it and proclaim it to all those around us. In fact, Paul tells us that the only way others will come to hear and believe this amazing good news of Jesus is if we actually share it with them. But if we're going to do that... well, then the Word of God needs to first be in our hearts and our lips.

And is it? Is God's Word something that is near to you because you insist on hearing it every week in church, and every day in your home...? Is God's Word buried in your heart and overflowing from your lips because you are so full of the gospel you can't help but tell others the good news...?

God certainly calls us to such a life... a life that is constantly in the Word. Consider the psalmist who writes **"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."** (Psalm 119:11) Memorizing the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer and passages that speak of God's law and gospel... this kind of work is not meant to be half hearted when we are in grades school or catechism class... and it's not meant to stop when we are confirmed. Memorize Scripture. Repeat God's promises again and again until they are burned into your heart, and burning within you to be shared with others.

God speaks of this too when it comes to his Word. Consider Moses who spoke in Deuteronomy to God's people saying: **"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates..."** (Deuteronomy 11:18-20)

The point? God's Word cannot simply be the thing we hear at church... the book we open when trouble comes into our lives... the song we sing at Christmas and Easter. No, the Word is for every day, making every action purposeful, every moment sacred, every relationship subservient to our relationship with God.

Luther understood this. Luther was in the city of Coburg in 1530 as the first official Lutheran confession of faith was being presented in Augsburg without him due to the death penalty hanging over his head for preaching the gospel. While there he was anxiously awaiting news from his fellow Reformers about how the assembly in Augsburg before the Emperor was going... and he did get some news... but it was from back home. His father had died. Luther took his Psalm book and locked himself in his room for the rest of the day.

Twenty years later Luther's doctor happened to be visiting that castle in Coburg and inspected the room where Luther had stayed. On the wall written in Luther's hand were the words of **Psalm 118:17** **"I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord."** Luther had even added some musical notes for singing this passage. Other psalm verses adorned the walls as well. Luther had a habit of writing down God's Words where he could have them before his eyes in such times of trouble.

Let us follow in his footsteps... search the Scriptures daily... see Christ crucified for you... witness him raised to life again for your salvation... sing these Words of your God in hymns filled with gospel promises... And if you can't carry a tune in a bucket, listen as others sing, and let the tune and text bind itself to your heart so that God's Word is a part of you... so that the gospel flows through you and from you. When this happens, God is glorified and Christ is confessed and faith is worked in the hearts of others. Our first reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10:

⁸But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith that we are proclaiming. ⁹Certainly, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and it is with the mouth that a person confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹For Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."

¹²So there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives generously to all who call on him. ¹³Yes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

¹⁴So then, how can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news of peace, who preach the gospel of good things!"

¹⁶But not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who believed our message?" ¹⁷So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ.

This is the Word of our God. We continue with our hymn response.

Hoc est corpus meum. I told you Luther like to write on walls... apparently, he also wrote on tables.

In October of 1529 Luther and the German Reformers gathered in the city of Marburg with Ulrich Zwingli and his fellow Swiss Reformers to discuss uniting in fellowship... Unity between Christian groups is something God desires in his Word. But not at the expense of

compromising the truth of his Word. And Zwingli would find out that Luther was not going to do any compromising.

As they discussed their possible union it became clear that they agreed on just about everything... except the teaching of the real presence of Jesus body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Zwingli was stunned that Luther felt it necessary to cling to this teaching when they might just agree that they were close enough for the sake of the greater good. But Luther could not deny the Words of Jesus. In fact before debating with Zwingli Luther took a piece of chalk and wrote on the table they would meet at. The words? **Hoc est corpus meum.** Latin for “**this is my body.**” Luther could not escape the Words of Christ. If Christ said his body and blood were truly present in simple bread and wine... then they were. God’s Word on it was enough for Luther even if reason objected and close friends urged compromise.

Why? Because the Gospel in Holy Communion – the good news in Holy Communion – is Christ. He is present, not just in spirit... not just metaphorically... but present truly... present bodily as he offers to his people in their hands and on their lips the very price of their salvation – his very own body and blood hidden miraculously in simple bread and wine. How can this be? Because he said so... **Hoc est corpus meum. This is my body.** Jesus is clear and simple in his speech. That was enough for Luther. It is enough for us.

In fact, the gospel in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is more than enough, more than we can fathom, more than we deserve. Because it truly is Christ. Think about what is happening when you come forward to receive the Lord’s Supper. You are uniting – communing – with God himself as Jesus’ body and blood become one with you. You are uniting – communing – with fellow believers who share not only a common confession of faith but a common purpose in this life: **to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.**

And you do all this as one who has no business being that close to God. After all your sins. The week gone by. The failures to obey. The pain you’ve caused others. The deeds left undone. After all of this, Jesus still comes to you... personally, bodily, in that moment... in simple bread and wine... and in a miracle of his grace he declares “This is for you. I am for you. My body which was given for you on the cross... I give to you now. My blood which was shed for you... I offer now freely. Take. Eat. Drink. For the forgiveness of your sins.”

The gospel in Holy Communion is something we will never cease to marvel at in this life, and in the life to come we will experience the fullness of this meal at the wedding supper of the Lamb. And until the day when the Lord comes to bring us to that feast, let’s feast with joy-filled and repentant hearts, humble and trusting hearts, hearts that are content to take Jesus at his Word when he says “**this is my body**” and to take that Word of grace up on our lips in word and song as we remember and proclaim Christ’s death and his deep desire to unite with us, his people.

Our second reading today from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11:

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after the meal, he also took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This is the Word of our God. We continue with an anthem from the choir.

Luther wrote on walls and tables... and also on his desk. With a piece of chalk Luther is said to have written in large letters: BAPTIZUS SUM in Latin. "I am baptized." Why? Because the gospel in baptism offers a special comfort to believers when faced with the enemies of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

When troubled by his sins with the devil whispering accusations and condemning him... Luther remembered "I am baptized." Not because his sins didn't matter... not because his baptism was a license to go on sinning... but because remembering the truth of his baptism assured Luther that his sin did not define him. Christ did. And so the devil's accusations could not stick.

Or when feeling alone and abandoned by his peers, and outnumbered by the world Luther remembered "I am baptized." This truth assured him of his place in the only family that matters in the end – the family of God. And so even when he saw family die and friends disown him, Luther knew his status as God's child and heir of heaven would never be lost.

"I am baptized" – Luther remembered this daily. We should too. Because our status as baptized children of God is something, like the Word, like the Supper, that is totally "extra nos" if you'd like another Latin phrase... it is "outside of us."

Baptism is not our act of submission or confession or dedication to God but his act of faithful love... his deed that declares us his sons and daughters... his cleansing that cannot be undone, his name placed on us, his gift of a new status... a standing in his family that gives us hope and comfort and a place to belong when the devil, this wicked world, and our wretched flesh seek to isolate us, drag us down, and condemn us.

Martin Luther took great comfort in such promises of God. Listen to a few of his thoughts on baptism that he shared while teaching on the Bible in the university of Wittenberg. Luther said:

God is taking care of you even if you do not see it or feel it... Do not underestimate yourself, since you have been baptized and since you have God's Word, have been absolved, and called! Think that the kingdom of heaven has been spread out over you and that not only God but all the angels have their eyes fixed on you. Therefore, even if all things are in confusion, heaven and earth are merged, all the gates of hell are moved, and the pope, the emperor, and the Turk rage in most cruel fashion, all you have to say is: "I am baptized." Then all is well with you; in this confidence you will conquer, for God is taking care of you; He will not forsake you.

Luther understood how powerful the gospel in baptism is for us! Think of what remembering your baptism could do to change how you view yourself in God's sight when what you see in your life doesn't seem so great.

The mother who feels defeated and deflated by a world that doesn't appreciate her sacrifices for her family, the teen who is reeling from the guilt of sexual sin, the child who feels like they're losing their family as divorce brings pain and uncertainty, the widow who wonders why she is still here, the Christian who waits on the operating table, or sits in the chair for chemotherapy, or stares at the hospice nurse while waiting for the angels to come.

"I am baptized." Do you see how this good news, this gospel, can change everything in those moments? You have worth to God, even if no one else sees it. You have forgiveness with God, no matter what you've done. You are righteous before God, because you are clothed in Jesus' perfection. You have a family with God no matter how blessed or broken your family is here on earth. You have hope in the face of sickness... confidence in the face of death... you have certainty of a life beyond this one, because of Jesus who died and rose for you. Because of Jesus, whose death and resurrection are your personal possession. Given in baptism. Covering your sin. Conquering your grave. Completed for you by your God who will never leave the children he has washed and renewed and restored.

Our third reading today from Paul's letter to Titus, chapter 3:

³For at one time we ourselves were also foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by many kinds of evil desires and pleasures, living in malice and jealousy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

This is the Word of our God. We continue with our next hymn.