

**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on February 14, 2021.**

**LUTHER: LIVING INTO GRACE**

***Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.***

**Romans 3:23-24**

This week Lent will begin on Ash Wednesday. During the Lenten Season we are going to focus on the meaning of suffering. So today we look at our final luminary for the season. We will pick up this series again after Easter.

Our luminary for today is larger than life. Martin Luther was a towering figure. He lived his life to the full. Both his good qualities and his bad qualities were over the top. He never did anything halfway. There are many things Luther can teach us, but the most important lesson from his life experience is learning to live into grace. How can we learn to accept the free gift of God's love? Luther lived out all the tensions and contradictions of law and grace, works and faith, and judgement and forgiveness.

Luther had the very human experience of wanting to feel worthy and accepted.

The fifteen-year-old girl spends the day in the mall shopping for the perfect clothes. She spends her allowance on manicures, waxing, and makeup and hair salons. All of this is done in an attempt to make herself acceptable to her peers.

The young man has played the violin since he was five years old. He has played in school orchestras and had private lessons and has sacrificed social opportunities to practice. He wonders whether his performance will lead to acceptance at Julliard.

The pre-med student in her senior year of college sweats out whether her grades and test scores are good enough to land her a place at the medical school of her choice.

The forty-year-old professional becomes a workaholic in an attempt to live up to the expectations of his deceased Father. There is a fear that continues to gnaw deep within him that he is just not making the grade.

The homemaker seeks to provide the perfect home for her children and husband. She wants to be the perfect home maker, yet with all her work somehow she does not feel that Martha Stewart would approve.

The sixty-six-year-old retired executive with lots of time and money on her hands questions whether she has any value to anybody without her title.

So much of our lives are attempts,  
    To become acceptable to a superior  
        To live up to the expectations of others  
            To feel worthy of acceptance by others.

This human pattern can lead us to approach God in a similar way.  
    We often wonder how can we make ourselves acceptable to God?

How are we to gain Christ's love?  
What must we do to earn salvation?

In Christian History there is one person whose experience addresses these questions directly. Martin Luther's struggles with these concerns launched the reformation.

Luther was born in 1483 to a family involved in the copper-mining industry. Luther's father wanted him to follow a career in the law and thus sent him to University. One day while returning to school after a visit with his family, a thunderbolt knocked him to the ground and nearly took his life. Luther cried out to the patron saint of miners, "St. Anne help! I will become a monk."

To the consternation of his Father, Luther kept his vow and entered a monastery. Luther attempted to become the best monk there could be. His purpose was to become the most faithful follower of Jesus that he could be. He wanted to make himself acceptable to God.

We need to remember that the Medieval Church had set up a whole system, which proscribed the actions necessary to receive the grace of Christ. Upon entering the Monastery, Luther threw himself into this system. Martin became the perfect monk. He fasted more than the other monks. He prayed longer than most of the others. He tried to make the perfect confession. In fact Martin's fellow monks became tired of his constant confessions of his shortcomings. His confessor began to hide from him in order to avoid listening to Luther admit some trivial shortcoming. It finally became so bad that the Superior of the Monastery, Staupitz told Martin that if he expected Christ to forgive him, he should come with something that really needed to be forgiven such as murder or adultery, instead of the trivialities that he was always going on about.

Yet for all his devotion,  
For all his following of the penitential order,  
Luther still did not have the assurance of God's love for him.

Martin felt that he just did not measure up to God's expectations of him.  
He continued to feel unworthy of God's grace.

Luther was given a professorship at Wittenberg University. He was to lecture on various books of the Bible. It was while preparing lectures on Romans, Galatians and the Psalms that Luther had an experience of true Grace. Martin came to the realization that God's love for us is not dependent on our actions, but rather on God's work in Jesus. It is the sacrifice of Christ in the cross that makes us acceptable to God and not our own moral struggle. Luther came to trust in God and not in his own righteousness.

The Reformation was ignited with the recapturing of the truth of the Gospel that we are made right with God solely by the grace of Christ. We can do nothing that earns God's love and we can do nothing that is so terrible that God ceases to care for us.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells a story that we usually call the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story the younger son treats his father harshly. When he went to his Father and asked for his portion of the estate, he was requesting that his Father pretend that

he was dead and thus divide his property. This was a great rejection of his Father's love and one that might seem to be unforgivable.

The younger son took his inheritance and went off to a far country. He did not live responsibly and soon dissipated all his wealth. We are not told all that he did, but we could guess that he used people and things purely for his own pleasure.

When his inheritance was gone, he was left with no money, no friends and no family. It seems even his soul had been corrupted. This is symbolized in his being reduced to feeding pigs. Remember Jews would have nothing to do with pigs. They were considered unclean animals. This symbolized the depths to which the boy's life had sunk. He decided to try and return home and apologize for all he had done.

When he returned, his father took off his old dirty clothes and gave him a new robe to wear. He gave his son a new beginning, the old was forgotten and he was made clean. There was nothing he had done to deserve this treatment. It was the sheer love and grace of the Father that made his life new.

Remember the reaction of the elder brother. He became angry with his Father for taking his brother back. The elder brother speaks for many of us. We may have spent our lives trying to make ourselves acceptable to God. We try to do the right thing: Why should someone who has done so much wrong be allowed back in the fold?

Yet in many ways the Gospel Story is not only about the Prodigal Son or the Elder Brother, but also focuses on the Father. The Father loved both his sons. He wanted to be in relationship with them. The story makes it seem that all during the time the younger son was gone, the Father kept one eye focused on the horizon. The Father never gave up hope that one day his son would return. Yet his other eye had been on his elder son whom he also loved.

So it is with our heavenly Father.  
No matter how far we may roam,  
No matter how long it takes,  
God waits for us.

Some may feel that they have ignored God for too long,  
Perhaps he will never want us.  
Yet the truth is that it is never too late to turn to God.  
Our heavenly Father is waiting for us.

This is the truth that Martin Luther learned that launched the Reformation. He learned that our assurance of God's love for us does not come from our own struggle to make ourselves worthy. God's love comes to us as a free gift when we turn to him in faith. **Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**

This is the truth on which the Reformation was based. One writer on Luther tells us:

**Luther was not a systematic theologian, trading in logical definitions or philosophical consistency. The systematizers who followed in his wake picked**

**out two key principles in his thought: sola fide and sola scriptura “faith alone” and Scripture alone.” But this risks missing the point. Luther’s theology was not a doctrine; it was a love affair. Consuming love for God has been part of Christian experience since the beginning, but Luther’s passion had a reckless extravagance that set it apart, and which has echoed down Protestantism’s history.**

That love affair is a response to the wonder of God’s gift of grace. Our only response is to accept the gift.

We are acceptable for one reason only; Jesus died for us and rose for our justification. This forgiveness is symbolized in our baptism. The writer Robert Capon tells us:

**The sheer brilliance of the retention of infant baptism by a large portion of the church catholic is manifest most of all in the fact that babies can do absolutely nothing to earn, accept, or believe in forgiveness; the church in baptizing them simply declares they have it. We are not forgiven, therefore, because we made ourselves forgivable or even because we have faith; we are forgiven solely because there is a Forgiver. And our one baptism for the forgiveness of sins remains a lifelong sacrament, the premier sign of that fact.**

Our heavenly Father loves us, not because of what we have done or anything we have avoided doing. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love. All that we must do is accept the gift. Grace is an amazing free gift from a loving God. It is free because Jesus paid the price on the cross.

In many churches of other traditions there are bowls of holy water situated near the entrance of the sanctuary. As men and women enter to worship or pray they put this water on their heads. In this act they are reminded of their baptism, the baptism in which God claimed them as his own.

In times of trial, doubt and anxiety, Martin Luther would touch his forehead and say, “Remember your Baptism.” This helped Luther to reconnect to the assurance that God loved him.

When we feel unworthy,  
Or unacceptable,  
Or unloved,  
Or unwanted.  
Remember your baptism  
And live into grace.

**Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**