



I hope that sometime in the next few weeks you will take the time to join us on Sunday morning or on Tuesday nights for the series on Martin Luther and the Reformation. I also encourage you to watch the 2 hour PBS program on Martin Luther (go to [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org) and search for “Martin Luther: The Idea”). About this time at least one of you wants to say, “wait a minute, we’re Episcopalian and not Lutheran so why are you pushing Martin Luther and the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation so hard?” The answer is that we can’t really know who we are as Episcopalians unless we know where we came from – what forces shaped us into this faith tradition we call Episcopal. At the same time, we cannot not dwell on the past to the exclusion of our future.

Our church is rapidly changing. What we have known is not what we will be – and sooner than we think. As we discern the way forward, it’s important to remember what grounds us in our tradition. What is essential to our faith versus what is preference. Change is here to stay. Our task is to find a future or find ourselves irrelevant. I believe that we have the vision among us to chart new ways of being church, keeping what is good and letting go of what has had its time in the sun but is no longer life-giving. We must proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to others so that they, too, may find life, deeper and more meaningful, within the Episcopal tradition. I invite you on this journey as it will take all of us pulling together to make our future a reality full of love of God and neighbor.

One of the things that is important to me about Martin Luther is that he translated the New Testament into German, the language of the people among whom he lived. Luther was one of the people who pushed for everyone to be able to read our Scripture in our own language. The rise of the printing press made transmission of God’s Word feasible. So today, each of us, lay and ordained, is charged with reading and knowing God’s Word as revealed to us through the Bible. With the charge to read the Bible comes responsibility to think about it, to interpret it. In our tradition, we find that reading and understanding God’s Word is best done in community. And that’s really important when we come to a passage like today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

This is a difficult passage for many of us partly because we in the United States don’t have debtor’s prisons. That was something that our founding fathers refused to permit as our country was being formed. After all, how can you pay the debt you owe if you are in prison? And, note

that in the first instance, not only was the man going to be sold, so too was the man's wife and children. And from the proceeds of the sale of that family as well as the sale of all their possessions, payment was going to be made to the king. Given that the debt owed equaled about 150 years of a man's labor, it is unlikely the sale of people and possessions would pay the debt in full. I wonder how the man got into such an overwhelming level of debt that it could never reasonably expect to be repaid.

That's Jesus's point. God has poured out grace upon grace to us. We cannot earn God's grace. It is a freely given gift. And so we're back to Martin Luther!

Luther struggled with being a good man. What did it mean to be human and be good? Was it possible to be "good enough" to be in relationship with God? In reading and studying Paul's Letter to the Romans, Luther came to three principles important to us today:

Sola fide = only faith

Sola scriptura = only Scripture

Sola gratia = only grace

It is through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior that we can be saved and receive eternal life. We cannot save ourselves by our own merits or our own actions. God became human in the person of Jesus Christ to show us how to love, how to live, how to forgive.

It is through scripture that we learn who God is and what God wants for us. This doesn't mean that other books or conversations aren't important. It suggests, though, that we consider what we read and learn through the lens of Scripture and most especially through the lens of the Gospels. To use an old term, it is worth considering the question: What would Jesus do?

It is through God's grace that we are forgiven and are able to be in right relationship with God and each other. God desires to be in relationship with us even as God will never force a relationship upon us. Our free will means that we are free to accept God's grace or to reject it. In other words, there are some lines that even God won't cross.

As God forgives our sins, time and time again, so also are we called to forgive the sins of others. The king forgives the debt owed to him, expecting that the man will then forgive debts owed to him. That the man did not is too often what we humans do. We don't see the grace extended to us and the hope of God that as we have been forgiven, so we should forgive. Despite the words we say each Sunday: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", we fail to pay forward the forgiveness we have received. When we do not forgive as God has forgiven us, our world remains a broken place. When we can forgive as we have been forgiven, we build the beloved community.

Paul reminds us that we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. We will each be accountable to God. If we have judged our brother and sister at fault simply because they do what we do not or they eat what we do not, we are the one at fault. Paul calls on us to live always to the honor of God, giving thanks to God for all that we are and all that we have.

In words familiar to us because they are part of our Burial Rite, Paul tells us:

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves.  
If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.  
So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

Despite all our human failings, God loves us. God wants a relationship with us but will not force it upon us. It is up to us to decide what our future will look like- both here at St. John's and in our own lives. We can live in ways that honor God when we understand the unmerited grace that surrounds us; when we read and study Scripture as pointing the way to a life that brings us closer to God, the creator, redeemer and sustainer; and to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, God's only son, who lived and died that we might have life and have it abundantly. Won't you join me on this journey? **Amen.**