

**“Reformed and Always Being Reformed”**    **Pastor Dave Carlson**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**July 27, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 2:1-10**

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 84:8-12**

A businessman was asked to tell what his personal faith meant to him. He thought back to his childhood. He recalled walking with his father one day, having to reach up to hold on to his dad’s hand. After a while he said, “Dad, I can’t hold on any longer; you’ll have to hold on to me for a while.” And he remembered the moment when he felt his father’s hand take over. That, he said, was the way it felt to him to have faith in God. And that was an act of grace. “...

By grace you have been saved.” That’s the assertion made by the Apostle Paul writing to the Ephesians in today’s New Testament lesson. It’s a promise – and an act of God, an act of God that we struggle with. Rather than accept the gift of God’s grace, we often feel we need to earn it. This is partly because we want to be in control of our own destinies, and partly because we live in a world of give and take where nothing is freely given.

You know, there was a time when God’s grace was not freely given. Oh, God was still freely giving it, it’s just that religious authorities were not passing it along to the people, at least not for free. I’m talking about the time in history before there were multiple denominations to choose from and all Christians belonged to the Catholic Church.

Imagine you were that child I just told you about, but instead of you having a hold of your loving parent’s hand, there’s a priest or a pastor in between. And you only feel the squeeze of God’s hand if the pastor or priest deems you worthy to receive it, and thus passes God’s loving hand squeeze on to you?

That’s how it was for our fellow Christians from around the year 300 (BCE) until the 1500s, when history gave birth to the Protestant Reformation. We as Presbyterians are a child of the Protestant Reformation, after which priests and other clergy could no longer claim to be intermediaries of God’s grace – holding hands in between us and God, at least not for Protestants like us. And the father of the Protestant Reformation was a man named Martin Luther.

Without the religious reforms that Martin Luther initiated, our Bibles might still be printed in Latin. Anybody here read Latin? I didn’t think so. So how would you know what’s in the Bible? A priest or bishop or cardinal or some other religious muckety-muck would tell you what’s in the Bible. Think of the power – and danger – that would create. One of the dangers was a thing called indulgences. Indulgences were sold by the Catholic Church for money as the only way people could be sure their deceased loved ones would get into heaven, at least not without a long time in the cleansing fires of purgatory. (We don’t believe in purgatory as Presbyterians.)

I know some of you already knew this, but others of you didn’t. And with new members joining the church today, what better time to spell it all out.

Who here knows where Martin Luther got his ideas about how the church ought to be run? Well, Luther was a Catholic priest and could read the Bible in Latin, so one of those places was from today's New Testament lesson, where Paul says, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient."

Martin Luther's careful study of this and other scripture gave rise to the first of three important changes in the church, changes which form the foundation of our religious beliefs today, nearly 500 years later.

The first change we are looking at today has to do with the centrality of the Bible. In the Presbyterian faith, we believe that God speaks to us through the Bible. But in Luther's time, because the Bible was only printed in Latin and only the rich and powerful could read it, the church became a place of greed, or as Paul says, it was "following the course of this world," following a disobedient spirit. And nobody knew it because nobody could read Latin and, thus, read what God actually says in Holy Scripture. There's nothing in there about indulgences.

Today, everyone has access to the Bible and is free to follow his or her Christian conscience in applying its teachings to daily living. And as a denomination, we do the same. In gathering at Presbytery meetings regionally, and at General Assembly nationally, we send elected representatives from among our fellow church members to collectively make decisions on behalf of the church. In doing this, each one of us is instructed and empowered to vote his or her Christian conscience.

We trust that the Holy Spirit is working through this process, as together as the body of Christ, we seek to discern and follow the will of God. In this way, we understand the PC (USA) – our denomination – to be a church that is "reformed and always being reformed according to the word of God" – according to the scripture that we all have access to and can read.

The second of Martin Luther's reforms of the church, we've already touched on: salvation by grace through faith alone. Paul writes to the Ephesians – and to us – saying, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast." You see, back in the day, priests and pastors and other clergy had a habit of boasting. But not anymore; not those who are true to Scripture.

You may have heard about this before, but there was once a certain pastor who dreamed he had died and was standing at the Gates of Heaven. He was told he needed 100 points to get in. "Well, I was a pastor for 47 years," he proudly announced. "That's nice," was the answer. "That gets you one point." "One point? That's all I get? Just one point for 47 years of service." "Yes, that's correct." "I visited shut-ins every chance I got." "One point." "I worked with the youth, and you must know what that is like." "One point." "I developed a number of recovery programs." "One more point; that makes four. You need 96 more."

“Oh, no!” the pastor cried in a panic. “I feel so helpless, so inadequate. Except for the grace of God, I don’t have a chance.” “Grace of God?” came the answer, “That’s 96 points. Come on in.”

The pastor realized what Martin Luther discovered in Scripture a long time ago: the grace of God is freely given to anyone who seeks it. It can not be earned by us or controlled by religious authorities.

The third and final reform advanced by Martin Luther that we are looking at today is called the Priesthood of All Believers. Paul says in Ephesians that “all of us once lived ... following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus ....” All of us who put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, are raised up to equal status in the eyes of God.

In Christ, no one is above another when it comes to the love of God or the work of the church. As Martin Luther wrote, “Whoever comes out of the waters of baptism can boast that he (or she) is ... a consecrated priest, bishop and pope.... There is no true, basic difference between laity and priests..., except for the sake of (the) work, but not (in) ... status.”

This creation of a system of equality within the Protestant church – as opposed to the hierarchy Catholic church – is the foundation of our PC(USA)’s representative form of governance. When I go to our regional Presbytery meetings, my vote on issues and policies stands equally alongside the votes of this church’s three elected Elders, or Commissioner representatives. And the four of us vote equally alongside the pastors and commissioners of all the other churches of Heartland Presbytery.

So you can see it takes a lot of faith to be a Presbyterian. As Presbyterians, we have faith that God speaks to each and every one of us through Holy Scripture, if we bother to listen.

As Presbyterians, we have faith that it is by the grace of God that we gain redemption and salvation – in this life and the next – apart from any success or failure that might befall us. We cannot earn God’s grace and acceptance, nor can we lose it apart from denouncing God, nor can anyone take it away from us.

And as Presbyterians, we have faith that we – you and I and all of God’s people – are empowered and called to discern and do the will of God through the church that Christ is bringing into being, a church that is reformed and always being reformed, according to the word of God. By the word of God (in Holy Scripture), you are called. By the grace of God, you are saved. By the Son of God, you are ordained (or empowered) to minister and serve through the church, all of us, alongside one another, as the Priesthood of Believers.

What you do with the Word that God has for you, the grace that God gives to you, and the calling that God has fashioned for you, well, that's up to you. I merely pray that together and as individuals, we find a way to make all that we do be to the glory of God, in service to Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

God of compassion, you call us to live in the light of your Word, and yet there are so many who are unable to see your light, let alone walk in it.

Lead us in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who have yet to hear it and experience your loving touch.

God our healer, you promise to make us whole and to overcome our physical, social, and material limitations.

Bring healing and light to those who are ill and live with physical pain, and shower upon those in need the abundance of your provision.

God of peace and hope, instill the confidence of your Spirit in the hearts and minds of those whose lives are governed by fear.

Loving God, as we celebrate the joys of life and encounter the struggles, help us to seek the light you provide and to shine it into the lives of others.

For you sent your son, Jesus Christ, as the light of the world, that we might be drawn together as the church.

We thank you for the unifying Spirit that he sends upon us, even as we pray in unity the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**