



Reformation Sunday 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church
Pastor Stephen Springer
October 29, 2017
2 Corinthians 8:7
“Abound in This Grace Also:
Reform in an Age of Disruption”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Someday I will visit the city of Rome. Rome is a city of great history and great food, my two favorite things. On the cover of your service folder is photo of a statue that I will see when I finally visit the Vatican. A nineteenth century sculpture by Adamo Tadolini: *Saint Paul the Apostle*. Entering the basilica, there are two statues. Each thirty-five feet high. Saint Peter on your left. Saint Paul on your right. Saint Peter holding the keys of the kingdom. Saint Paul holding a sword.

Peter and Paul were individual leaders and preachers and missionaries and were the midwives of the birth of the Christian Church, and therefore influenced history as dramatically as any king or army. But in addition to their actual, historical accomplishments, together Peter and Paul symbolize the creative tension that gives life and flexibility and largeness to the Christian Church. The Christian yin and yang. What Socrates and Plato called dialectic.

One consequence of the Protestant Reformation— one of the unintended and unfortunate consequences of the Reformation was the fragmentation of Peter and Paul as symbols of dialectic. Paul unwittingly became the emblem of Protestantism. Without his consent. And Peter became the emblem of the papacy. Without his consent.

This is understandable, given how much the Lutheran Reformation relies upon the writings of Paul. It is there, in Paul’s writings, that we find the hallmark teachings of Martin Luther and his Reformation.

- (1) *“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”* [Romans 3:28].
- (2) *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”* [Ephesians 2:8]

(3) *“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.”* [Galatians 2:21]

You can look into the face, that fierce and heroic face of Tadolini’s Paul— with that sword brandished in the right hand, and you imagine the vigorous words of Paul: *“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing!!!”*

It just sounds and feels like Martin Luther standing before the Holy Roman Emperor, saying “Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise!” The voice of Paul and the voice of Luther. Voices of righteous indignation. Voices of conscience that will not be silent. Heroes.

Some members of Dove of Peace recently bought me some socks in Germany. The socks say, “Here I stand.” I’m wearing them this morning. German on my left ankle. English on my right ankle.

Five centuries after Martin Luther we are living in an age of disruption. Disruption. That used to be a bad thing. My earliest memories of that word go back to elementary school. Disrupting class. That was a bad thing. But today it may not be all bad. If you Google the word “disrupt,” the first thing that comes up on your Google search is a high-tech convention in San Francisco. A “disruptor” is an innovation that disrupts the marketplace. If someone offers you the chance to invest in a disruptive technology, you could make millions of dollars. The ride-sharing business of Uber has disrupted the traditional taxicab business. The online shopping experience of Amazon has disrupted the traditional retail industry and caused many stores to close. The music streaming service, Spotify, has altered the music industry forever. An entrepreneur can be a big winner in the marketplace if they are a disruptor. Disruptor can be a positive thing, in the right context...

The word disrupt is related to the words corrupt and erupt. The word disrupt is related to the words bankrupt and interrupt. It is related to the words rupture and abrupt. They’re all based on the Latin word for “break.” These are all the offspring of a single Latin word, and THEY DEFINE THE AGE WE LIVE IN. Interrupt. Bankrupt. Corrupt. Abrupt. Disrupt. Look around, look in any direction. Behold the Age of Disruption.

In many ways, Martin Luther and the Reformation were disruptive. Like Uber and Amazon and Spotify, the Reformation of 500 years ago shook up institutions that had grown complacent. The Reformation of 500 years ago attacked the establishment and the accepted authorities. The Reformation of 500 years ago PROTESTED so vehemently and so often that the word “Protestant” was coined as a term of disparagement to describe people like Luther. 500 years ago.

But today. You. Me. Today, in the age of disruption, is it fitting for you and for me to celebrate Protestant disruption as the true legacy of the Reformation? Is this the gift that Lutherans offer to the world? More disruption? Is this the good news of Jesus Christ? The elimination of authority and institutions and tradition? Is this the good news that we proclaim?

My brothers and sisters, please know this one thing. The Apostle Paul– the emblem of Protestantism, the icon of the Lutheran Reformation– the Apostle Paul vigorously defended Christianity that was free. Free from the demands of the Law. Free from human traditions. Freed by Christ from slavery to sin and death. Freed by the justification that comes by grace alone, through faith alone. Know that.

However, my brothers and sisters– this morning, 500 years on– please know *another* thing. That Paul the Apostle spent more time on an enterprise that we call the Jerusalem Collection than he spent teaching grace and faith and freedom. The Jerusalem collection. A collection, an offering, a fund-raiser. A campaign to raise money. He wrote more about this project than he ever wrote about grace and faith and freedom. Verse for verse, book by book. This fund-raiser is a larger component of the New Testament Paul than all of those cherished verses that Lutherans hold dear.

And the money raising wasn't for Paul or for any congregation that he served. The Christian community in Jerusalem was poor. And often hungry. It was comprised of Jewish Christians. Paul's churches were the Gentile Christians. The *Jerusalem* Christians had basically rejected Paul.

In your service folder, I've printed the actual words of Paul. "*And when James and Cephas [that's "Peter"] and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.*" [Galatians 2:9-10] James and John and Peter told Paul to go do his thing with the Gentiles. And that they would tend to the Jewish Christians– the circumcised. But would Paul please raise money for their people, in their churches? They sort of rejected Paul, and they may have looked down on the churches that Paul was sent to serve. But they asked for his financial help, and the support of the Gentile Christians, whom they seemed to look down on as second-class.

The great miracle is that Paul and the Gentile churches followed through. This enterprise, this collection, is mentioned in five key books of the New Testament– Acts, Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, and Galatians. Some say that Paul worked on this enterprise for ten years. Magnanimity toward those who disagree with us. Generosity toward those who condescend to us. IT'S WHAT YOU DO if you are a follower of Jesus. Jesus said:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. [Luke 6:27-31]

The younger Americans say they don't trust the Church because the Church doesn't do what Jesus said.

Saint Paul the Apostle DID do what Jesus said. In our second reading this morning, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that he hopes to visit them soon. But first, Paul says, first! He must deliver the contribution to Jerusalem. The *Gentile* Christians in what we call Greece raised money for the *Jewish* Christians in Jerusalem. The grace and faith people gave generously to the law and works people. And Paul took that generosity to Jerusalem. In our second reading this morning, Paul says, “Pray for me.” I realize these words flow past us smoothly and deceptively. But in our first reading, Paul begged the Christians in Rome: *Join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea.* Paul feared for his life, but he HAD to get that money to the suffering Christians who had been so dismissive of him.

The first Mardi Gras celebration we ever had at Dove ten years ago, we took up a collection for New Orleans. For Lutheran Disaster Response after Hurricane Katrina. And we invited the public to those Mardi Gras celebrations. Why should people in Arizona care about Katrina victims who don't share our religion, our culture, our values, or our weather. Paul was in that tough position of raising money from people he served in order to assist some other people in another part of the world who had not been very kind or accepting to Paul and the people from whom Paul was soliciting money.

As Paul was raising this money, he twice asked the church in Corinth— Gentile Christians— to contribute to his campaign for Jerusalem— the Jewish Christians. Twice: In First Corinthians. And he asked again in Second Corinthians. Tough crowd, the Corinthians. And in Second Corinthians, Paul wrote these immortal words, which I proclaim to you in the King James translation: *Abound in this grace also.*

Grace is a tricky word. Because it means gift. In the Reformation 500 years ago, that word “grace” meant the GIFT of God's unconditional forgiveness. And anyone who attaches strings to that free gift, any religious authority who manipulates the free gift is corrupt. That was the Reformation *then*. The grace of God toward sinners that the Church must always proclaim no matter what. That was the Reformation *then*. Paul spoke about all of that.

But Paul ALSO went on to say “*Abound in THIS grace also.*” Be generous in this gift toward those who have been mean to us. Work with me in this enterprise— Paul COULD have used the word “offering,” a word which he knew well. Or he could have said “this collection.” He could have said “this enterprise.” He didn't! He said “Grace.” *Abound in this grace also.*

Paul was telling the Christians in Corinth— as he sought their help in reaching out to the others— Paul knew that *they* knew the first grace, Martin Luther's grace— the free gift of God's unconditional love. NOW, Paul said, *Abound in THIS grace also.* Live abundantly in this project of kindness and generosity toward those who are not kind and generous. A second grace. Receive grace, then BE grace. Pay it forward. *Abound in this grace also.*

Martin Luther never wanted any church to use his name. Martin Luther, in other words, never wanted there to be Lutherans. However, 500 years later, the people who call ourselves Lutherans are living into Paul's vision of grace. We ARE abounding in this grace also.

In Lutheran Sweden, where Pope Francis preached in a Lutheran cathedral, one year ago. (Parts of our service this morning come from that event.) At the pope's side was the president of the Lutheran World Federation, a Palestinian who lives and works in the West Bank, and once pastored the Lutheran Church of Hope— that's its name— in Ramallah; a Christian Arab whose theological training was in Finland: Bishop Munib Younan. Lutherans... *Abound in this grace also.*

In Mississippi, where Christus Victor Lutheran Church opened a camp to accommodate the 50,000 Lutheran volunteers who came through the region to repair, rebuild, and heal in the months after Hurricane Katrina. And Lutheran Disaster Response which took the lessons of Katrina and uses them now for the victims of hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. Lutherans... *Abound in this grace also.*

In downtown Tucson on Stone Avenue, where Lutheran Social Services resettles refugees that the American government has accepted due to persecution. Lutherans... *Abound in this grace also.*

In North America, where our church— the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America— maintains constructive interfaith dialogs with other religions, and dialogs with varieties of Christians and has full communion relationships— interchangeable clergy and sacraments— with the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, and the United Methodist Church— AND the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has publicly apologized to the Jewish people for the anti-Semitism of Martin Luther and those whose hate he justified... our church actively builds up others, and builds up relationships, and builds up understanding. Lutherans... *Abound in this grace also.*

At Dove of Peace Lutheran Church where three generations of the Wagner family have learned and loved and lost and lived, and one of them right now is directing the biggest bratwurst cookout of his life so that our community and our neighbors can have food and music and joy. *Abound in this grace also.*

Today, 500 years later, there are three popes on our Lutheran calendar: Clement, Gregory, and John XXIII— who convened the Second Vatican Council. Vatican 2, very important. In some ways was the culmination of Martin Luther's work. Three popes on our calendar. Pope Pius IX is not one of them. Pius IX in Italian is "Pio Nono." Very popular with the Italians. They named a dessert after him. Pio Nono. One of my colleagues always says that he thought Pio Nono meant "Curb your pet." Pio. No, no. Pope Pius IX commissioned those two, great 35-foot statues. Peter and Paul. The great dialectic. The creative tension. The power of collective intelligence.

Look again at the photo of Tadolini's Paul. He appears to be staring directly at us. But he actually holds in his hand his letters. The letters he wrote to the churches. And that's what he's staring at. His words to the churches, his words to us. In his right hand, he holds a sword. Why does Paul carry a sword? Is it because he was militant about his beliefs? No. Is it because he said that the Word of God is a sword? No. Somebody else in the Bible wrote that. No, Paul carries a sword because Paul was executed by the Roman Empire. Like Jesus. Like Peter. In Paul's case, his capital punishment was beheading. The sword represents how he lost his life in witness to Jesus Christ. And therefore high in the background above both Saints Peter and Paul, blurry in our photograph, is Jesus Christ. It is art and architecture, proclaiming the wideness of the Church's mission, and the diversity that has been ours since the beginning.

Paul never intended to be the emblem for Protestantism. Or for the Reformation. He never knew that his writings about justification by grace would become doctrines promulgated in lands that he never heard of and in tongues that he never spoke. Perhaps he is pleased at how well his words have endured.

But today on the 500th anniversary of Reformation, I give you Paul's additional challenge. There is another dimension to grace. A dogged form of service, a tenacious generosity, grounded in the words of Jesus, that overcame suspicions and scorn and slander. And in this age of disruption, those words ring out again: *Abound in this grace also*. That notion of grace that is so lovingly distilled by Lutheranism— that liqueur, that vanilla extract from Paul's letters reformed the Church 500 years ago. Hallelu, hallelu. But Paul has not stopped speaking. Paul still has more to say to us. Today, 500 years later. *Abound in this grace also*. Never turn away from that first grace. But now, at the turn of the tide, *abound in this grace also*. Amen.