

...but now...." A sermon preached on October 22, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: JEREMIAH 31:31-34

ROMANS 3:19-

This is the season marking not only the birth of Martin Luther, Protestant Reformer of the 16th century (November 10th), but

This year it marks the 500th anniversary of Luther's action that began the process toward change and re-examination of the Church – read the Roman Church in Western Europe

The impact of Martin Luther has been so enormous That it is virtually impossible to imagine how Western Christianity would have evolved had Luther never taken the actions he did.

To be sure, Luther was often unhappy with the direction the Reformation was taking. The violence and persecution upset him greatly. Nevertheless

One cannot deny that the divergent wings of the Reformation – among them Presbyterians in Scotland under the leadership of John Knox, Katharine's message last week,

Reformers in Switzerland under the leadership of John Calvin – who we will look at in a couple of weeks

Took their first impulses from Luther

Even Catholicism,

In order to defend itself against the Reformation challenge

Corrected many errors with Lutheran critique before it.

However,

All of this was a long time ago.

It can be argued that Luther's world was far too different from our own for Luther to have for us,

Much more than a historic interest

How can us living in the second decade of the 21st century

Derive much religious instruction,

Insight about the Gospel,

Touch points as it were

From a late medieval monk named Martin Luther?

Let us be honest – between Luther and ourselves, stand such scientific geniuses as Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Einstein.

People like Descartes, Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.

We live on a continent that Europe did not even know existed when Luther was born.

He lived in a time when successful democracy seemed inconceivable.

Luther himself lived in a crazy quilt of territories and principalities under the Holy Roman Empire.

Luther's Germany does not even begin to resemble what we know as Germany today until the middle of the 19th century.

To Luther, political equality was synonymous to chaos.

Further,

As a child of his age, when religious toleration was not much in vogue,

Luther's writings have within them incidents of appalling religious intolerance – especially against those of the Jewish faith and tradition.

We could go on –

Exploring the many ways in which the modern day would seem to have passed Luther and the Reformation by.

Every European history course I took in which the 15th and 16th centuries were part of the course, Had one seminar and one exam question on this topic – *the differences between Reformation Europe and 20th century North America.*

Whenever we discuss historical personalities of the faith – whether scriptural personalities or those touched by scripture, as Luther was

It is important to keep in mind the difference between then and now.

Yet, in Luther's case,

There is a sense in which the relative historical differences,

No matter how radical they may be, are finally somehow beside the point.

For a major touch point of the
Reformation and Luther and us remains:

The grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Luther's way of expressing that grace

The specific conditions into which he sought to
bring the light of that grace – opposing papal
indulgences and like matters –

These were, of course, relative to his historical
situation.

He was obviously a 16th century preacher and
teacher.

BUT THE GRACE to which Luther pointed,
God's gift in Christ,

Is as meaningful today as it was then to God's people.

By Luther's time, the Church had buried that truth
of God's grace in a host of ritual and human rules.

I believe what really separates us from Luther,
Is not in the first place the 500 years.

What separates us from Luther and makes him hard
to take

In fact what for many makes teachings of the

Apostle Paul hard to consistently hold to

Is their utter, uncompromising insistence that ALL
IS FINALLY GRACE.

*EVERYTHING WE HAVE IS AN UNMERITED GIFT
FROM A GOD WHO LOVES US AND THEREFORE
SEEKS ANY AND ALL MEANS TO BRING US
INTO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM*

In spite of a do by self-attitude,

It all about me perspective,

It is someone else's fault view,

God continues to love us and wants so much to listen, obey and follow Him.

This is not an abstract theological discussion starter

This is not a point for debate – it is an uncontestable fact!

A fact we can and must hold to in our daily lives

Yet, how often do we as God's people take such a declaration for granted or worse – treat it as unnecessary for life in the here and now!

Paul's Roman letter – especially chapters 1 and 3 and we say – yeah so what??

Expiation, righteousness, divine forbearance, justified – this is seminary, minister school trained language Really?

Romans is certainly Paul's most carefully crafted and argued letter

Yet it was still written to and for believers like you and I.

Paul means his readers then and now, to read and think about what he is writing

--not just hear it once and say – too hard for me to understand.

Well, then maybe we need to hear it read, or listen in a language that is perhaps not so "theological"

A suggestion – read Romans in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*.

Also, if even after several times you hear it read or read it yourself these chapters 1 and 3 of Romans,

You say, I still do not fully understand.

However, I am willing to admit that what Paul is saying – the meaning of Jesus death for all believers for all time – is central to the work of Jesus Christ.

Is it that partial knowledge at a point wrong?

This is deep stuff – in the end mystery really.

I maintain it is largely owing to the fact that many of God’s people have not turned the truths of scripture over and over in their minds – ruminated on the truths, pondered the truths – what DOES THIS mean, what DOES THIS SAY

And preachers and teachers have not tried to answer the question – *what does this particular text say to God’s people today* –

Has contributed in a large way to the situation where the Bible is treated as only somewhat dated and limited rule book

--a book full of woes and thou shalt nots

--rather than the revealed and full counsel of God’s relationship to his people – to the Israelites first, and then by the death of Christ, to all believers for all time!!

The Bible has counsel and guidance that remains ever current

And insightful
 Not only about God — is who Lord,
 But also about us His creatures.

So, you do not have to make the scriptures relevant for today — THEY ARE RELEVANT.

We see this over and again in things like money, power, leisure time, rest, work, priorities, and death.

Here this morning, we see it in how we treat others, How others are seen in the eyes of God — not just the others we like — ALL others.

What Paul, and then Luther reflecting on Paul's letter address in their own way is God's unmerited, free, spontaneous love for us.

Revealed and made effective in Jesus Christ.

A given — not something we can buy
 Grace of God — not something we get because we do good works or be really nice people — Grace is something shown by God through the death of his son Jesus.

--that unparalleled demonstration of God's love

And grace is also only fully appreciated,
 Comprehended,

Understood by a faith we have that God has in fact initially reached out to us,

To forgive us,

To bring us back into a right relationship with Him,
 lost at Eden

Hear Paul's words as Eugene Peterson in *The Message* heard them.

21-24 But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us.

Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. [Romans 3:21-24]

One of the best known preachers of this grace of God was the former slave trader, turned Anglican cleric – John Newton.

Some years ago, on PBS, Bill Moyers hosted a programme that spoke about Newton and the effects his words continue to have on people. Even though it is a hymn, much over worked and over done as I see it,

Its words still pack a punch don't they?

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

*Through many dangers; toils and snares,
I have already come;
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home*

The hymn's message, Paul's message is essentially this:

You, I, each of us are by our faith in you, forgiven and made right with God.

Not by anything we have done

But because God loves each of us so much that He allowed Your Son, Jesus Christ,

To die for my sins – to die for those things that drives a wedge between our relationship with God, with others and within us.

*...it is all about God's grace in Jesus – it all boils down to
nothing less than this in this life*

St. Paul never saw God's grace in a removed – has nothing to do with real people way

Neither did Luther,

And certainly neither did John Newton – the lyrics of Amazing Grace reflect clearly a man who has been profoundly and personally touched by God's love.

Maybe that is what is missing today in the lives of so many of God's people – the profound and personal awareness and touch of God's grace in their lives – here and now.

Not just for those people
 Not just for other people,
 But for you and for me – constantly and
 consistently.

Do you see what both a liberating and humbling
 truth God's grace is for our lives?

Liberating because the grace of God frees us from
 seeing our own sense of worth

Solely in terms of how the world sees worth and
 worthiness

--what we do; what we have; the power we wield.

That definition of worth is so fleeting, because we
 cannot always jump through all the hoops,

Or always balance all the responsibilities and
 expectations all the time.

Things happen to us – some within our control and
 some beyond our control

At that point, the world is very quick and very good
 at telling us how unworthy we are,

How useless we are.

But worth based on the Grace of God reminds
 us that *our sense of worth comes from being created and
 saved by God's love.*

*Worth is then not measured by trying harder to be good,
 kind, nice people – though that is important too*

Grace says – you are worthy of my love by the
 death of my son – believe that, live in that light.

Yet how often do we run ourselves ragged
 believing that God will love us more if we do more
 and more things,

If we try harder and harder to please God by
actions and works

Sadly what happens – and this happened in
Luther's life – the harder he tried to please God, the
more convinced Luther became that he was not
worthy...so much so that he did almost go mad.

UNTIL the insight in Paul's letters hit him

We ARE forgiven,

We are made right with God – not owing to our
actions, but owing to God's initiative for us.

You are forgiven.

All will be well

That's incredibly liberating – for it helps us to step
off the hamster wheel of doing good works.

The grace of God is also *humbling* truth

For it is a reminder that it is God who is the
initiator – **you did not choose me, but I choose you
to go and bear good fruit.**

And we are not chosen by God because we earned
it

Or paid for it,

Or even asked for it

Rather, God's grace comes as a gift to all who
believe

And that is *humbling* – because it reminds us that
we are not the centre – GOD IS

God is the planner

God is the initiator

God provides this way of getting right with him

God provides everything –needs and a considerable number of wants

Certainly much has changed since Luther's reflections and applied convictions turned the established church on its ear.

And forced it to change many of its hidebound ways.

What has not changed is the message by God through the work of Christ,

Then reaffirmed by Paul,

By Luther,

By all the reformers

By John Newton and by others since —

God alone saves.

We are utterly without hope, save for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Truly,

'tis grace has brought me safe thus far

And grace will lead me home