

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, September 10, 2017 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 65 – All People That On Earth; 420 – Praise, I Will Praise You Lord;

292 – Father, I adore you; 479 – The Church’s One Foundation

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 2:1-10

Sermon Title: By Faith, By Grace, By Scripture – “The Five Solas” Introduction

*Ephesians 2:1-10 NIV*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

*Acts 2:42-47*

*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper) and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

Did you get the idea as you listened to that passage from Luke, that he was painting the picture not so much of a church, but of a family? A family where everyone got along, where everyone shared what they had, shared meals together, shared the same values, the same hopes, the same dreams, the same faith in the same

God? A family, as Luke writes, typified by “great joy and generosity.” A happy family. A truly happy family.

Maybe you have a family like that, or had a family like that in the past. Or maybe you once knew a family like that, and wished you were a part of it, wished it were yours. Maybe they even invited you in, shared a meal with you, a holiday, some time.

Well, “The church was like that,” writes Luke. It was a family, a truly happy family, and the doors were open, the welcome mat out, and all were welcome.

So what happened? Unfortunately, as with many families, over time, dysfunction began to set in. Power struggles arose. Arguments over who sets the rules, who is in charge. Disputes and disagreements over how things should be done, over who gets what. People began to lose sight of what drew them together, began lose touch with the basic family values, with what made them a family in the first place. Most tragically, the church began to lose sight of *who* made them a family in the first place. They lost sight of Jesus. Soon it became all about power and control. Soon, it became all about money. Like a divided family arguing over a will, soon it became all about money. Maybe you have a family story like that. I hope not.

Over the years, and reaching a sorry peak about 500 years ago, the family of the church could only be described as dysfunctional. We lost sight of our purpose. Corruption had become endemic. Concerned with maintaining financial and political power, the church had lost direction. We forgot what we were about. We lost our family resemblance. We lost our way.

Many in the church had tried with progressively less success to fix what wasn't working, but just as in our own dysfunctional families, change was hard, inertia took over, and solutions fell by the wayside. But then one member of the family had enough. One member of the family started pushing for change, and wouldn't stop until change had come. That person was Martin Luther. Not Martin Luther King Jr.; no, the Martin Luther born in the little German town of Eisleben, way back in the distant year of 1483.

You've heard his story before, from me and from others. Luther, a professor, pastor, teacher and monk, reading Scriptures such as we read earlier, recognised that the church was no longer what it should be. He believed and began to very

effectively proclaim that the Church, if it was to reflect at all what God had in mind, had to recover the family values that brought it into being. First of all, it had to regain its focus on Jesus Christ, who had somehow gotten lost in all the ceremony, ritual, glitz and tinsel of church life. To recover its relationship with Jesus, the church had to get back to the basics, in fact to three basics: that we come into right relationship with God - we become part of the family of God - by faith alone, by grace alone, by Scripture alone. Or, more clearly, that people are put right with God by faith in Jesus Christ alone, that every believer has direct access to God through God's grace alone, and that the Bible is the sole source of authority for faith and life. And the church needed to remember that all the church does, is to be done not for its own aggrandisement or status or gain, but solely to the Glory of God.

That people are put right with God by faith alone meant that you no longer had to go through an elaborate series of rituals to achieve forgiveness of sins. Visiting or possessing a particular religious relic was not the answer. Climbing the steps of the cathedral on your knees wasn't the answer. Carrying a medallion of some saint or other wasn't the answer. Donating richly to the church wasn't the answer (but don't let me discourage you from giving richly to the church!).

The path to God was and is through faith in Jesus Christ; through believing that in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, God has come to the world, has died for the world, has paid the price for the sin of the world, and is risen to new life and salvation for the world. It is through Christ that we come to know God as a loving parent. It is through Christ that we see what it is to truly live. It is through Christ that we are given new hope, new hearts, new lives. Belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and the determination to follow him as Saviour and Lord (proclaimed Luther, echoing the Scriptures) is the way to salvation. The gift of salvation cannot be earned. Nor can it be sold! The medieval "salvation mill" of the Church, which, at its worst, had become little more than the buying and selling of forgiveness, was destroyed.

The second cornerstone of the Reformation, the understanding that every believer has direct access to God, was in response to the popular belief that to approach God, one must go through the accepted channels of the church. One had to go through this saint or that, for a prayer to be received by God. Access to God was determined on the basis of merit, the church taught. God would only listen to those good enough for their prayers to be heard. Salvation was granted only to those who, through good deeds, generosity or self-sacrifice, had earned salvation. Where there

was no priest, there was no confession, no absolution, no forgiveness, no salvation. The church, through its teaching and its practice, had become a barrier between God and humanity, rather than the pathway it was created to be.

In correction of this, “Sola gracia,” By Grace Alone. As Luther read in Paul’s revolutionary letter to the Ephesians: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.”* Every believer can approach God directly, even as any child can ask for their loving parent - not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of the amazing grace of God. By the Grace of God, God cares for us, loves us, understands us, reaches out to us, responds to us and to our needs. God hears our prayers for help the same way a loving parent hears the cry of their child. The church exists in grace as the gathered family of the children of God, a place where we might grow and learn, might receive encouragement and comfort, might celebrate together the love God has for us all. All that we are, all that we shall be, all that is provided for us, comes as a free gift of the grace of God. Not because we deserve it; but because God, in infinite mercy, freely offers it.

How do we know this? How do we know what we are being taught about God is correct? Sola scriptura, said Luther, By Scripture alone. The Bible is the sole source of authority for faith and life. If the church tells us one thing and the Bible tells us another, the church is wrong. Popes can be wrong. Church councils can be wrong. Ministers, hard to believe though that may be, can be wrong. The Scriptures are, in a special and important way, God’s Word to us, the timeless, true witness and testimony to the teaching and person of Christ. The Church cannot and must not do what the Scriptures do not teach, and the Church must ever and always evaluate itself not by the standards of the world but by the Word of God. By the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, God speaks to his people through his Word. Because this is so, people should have access to the Bible, in a language they can understand; churches should teach their people how to read and understand the Scriptures, openly and honestly.

Luther, despite threat of death, translated first the New and then the Old Testaments out of the Latin understood only by scholars into the common language of the market and the street, and he inspired others to do so in many languages across the globe. All the wonderful Bible translations we have today are descendants of this breakthrough; all of us have the freedom and privilege to access the Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures. The power of God’s Word was very firmly taken out of

the hands of the hierarchy of the church and back into the hands of the People of God. For the good of all. And the Glory of God.

By Faith, By Grace, By Scripture; To the Glory of God; In Jesus Christ our Lord. Back to the basics. The windows and doors of the church were again open; the light came flooding in. The family began to heal. But tragically, it also began to fragment; Protestants on one side of the divide, Roman Catholic on the other. Why, if the Scriptures are so clear, didn't the whole Church reform? Why the split?

Well, Luther had never had any thought of founding a new church; he was hopeful that change would come from within. Unfortunately, many of the leaders of the old church, locked within their tradition and unable to break the old patterns they were used to, viewed these revolutionary changes as a threat to all they knew and thought they understood. Change is hard, and not only for medieval bishops and Popes. Remember the old joke: "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "CHANGE?????" Or this answer: "One to change the bulb, and nine to complain about how they liked the old bulb better."

Locked into this attitude, the hierarchy of the church responded to Luther's challenges by condemning him to death, and many times over at that. As with a truly dysfunctional and divided family, there was no alternative, it seemed, but to split. People wanted change. People needed change. So, to prevent reform from simply taking the form of rioting in the streets and burning down big cathedrals, Luther had no choice but to establish new churches. Church services were simplified and turned into the language of the people. The clergy and the monks and nuns began to get married. The authority of Rome began to diminish throughout Germany, and with the help of the printing press the Reformation spread throughout Europe and into Scandinavia, England, Scotland. The Protestant Church was born. Eventually, reforms were enacted within the Roman Catholic Church as well; I have been involved in some of the Roman Catholic / Lutheran Church dialogue of the last number of years, and it would be astonishing and gratifying to Luther and his compatriots to see how much agreement now exists between these once bitter and estranged sister churches.

The blessing of the Reformation is that it recovered this central idea of faith in Jesus Christ - By Faith, By Grace, By Scripture – all to the Glory of God. We do not earn our salvation through good works: we respond to our salvation with good works. It is a free, but priceless gift. But the recovery of this gift has come at a cost, and that

cost is the division of the family, and the splitting of the Church. Denominations within Protestantism abound, and the family is hopelessly fragmented. Unable to live under the same roof, the family has separated, is trying to keep innumerable houses going, existing often in competition rather than in cooperation. The result is the often pointless duplication of effort in trying to do the work God would have us do.

Just think what the six Prince Street churches – First Baptist, Salvation Army, Central Christian, Zion, St. Paul’s, Trinity – could accomplish, if we joined our hands, our resources, our energies, into the common cause of bringing Christ to our community and world. I like to think that the Advent and Lent services and studies we share in common are a foretaste of how that could be. And what a wonderful testimony to the Grace of God that St. Dunstan’s Basilica is now involved as well! Someday – maybe someday – we will again be worshipping together, all churches, joined as one by the grace of God to do the good work God would have us do. As Jesus prayed (John 17:21-23),

*Father, I pray that my followers will all be one, just as you and I are one - as you are in me, Father, and I am in you... May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.*

Followers of Jesus Christ, a functional family together, united by Faith, by Grace, by Scripture, all to the Glory of God. It seems an impossible dream, but by the grace of God, I pray it is on its way. May God help us to see how we might be reformed and yet always reforming, separate and yet united in love and purpose, truly the Church Catholic. Let’s live up to our family name of Christian, and reach out to our brothers and sisters in the faith, joining hands in common effort, pulling one another up out of our pews and into the good work of Grace, together to do the mighty acts of God. Amen.