

“500th Anniversary of the Heidelberg Disputation”

The question came up in confirmation class. “Pastor, are we going to have class next Wednesday night since it’s Halloween?” After a discussion on if 7-8th graders and high schoolers are too old to go trick or treating or not I ended the discussion by saying, “If there is any day out of the year that Lutheran Christians should meet to study God’s Word it would be October 31st.” That statement might have been a bit too strong as every day is a good day to gather with like-minded Christians to study God’s word. And certainly Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter would also be days in the discussion for the most important day for Christians to meet together. But I hope you understand my point. It’s not wrong to put on certain costumes and collect candy from strangers, but if given the choice to Trick or Treat or study God’s Word on Oct. 31st – that is a no brainer decision. Last Wednesday I woke up with a heart filled with the peace of knowing that all my sins are forgiven by God through Christ Jesus. Last Wednesday I woke up certain that I will be going to Heaven when I die because of my Savior Jesus. Last Wednesday I woke up confident that if I died that day my dead body will be raised back to life on the last day because Jesus promised. Last Wednesday I woke up aware of what my purpose and reason is for existing on this earth. And every day since last Wednesday and many before last Wednesday I experienced the same thing. If you woke up last Wednesday enjoying those same blessings then you, like me, are the beneficiary of God’s blessing of the Lutheran Reformation of the Christian Church. On Oct. 31st, 501 years ago, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses or statements to the church doors in Wittenberg Germany in an effort to get scholars in his university and leaders in the church to discuss concerns he had about some things being taught and practiced in the Christian church of the early 1500’s A.D. that were keeping people from having peace with God, certainty of Heaven, confidence to face death, and awareness of their purpose in life. Little did Luther know at that time that God would use him as his tool, like he had used other Christians throughout history as well, to focus people on the peace, certainty, confidence, and awareness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Most of you are probably familiar with Martin Luther’s 95 theses. We celebrated the 500th Anniversary of this important event in 2017. While the 95 theses made Martin Luther famous, it was his Heidelberg Disputation 6 months later that was the match that really got the Reformation going. Since many of you are probably not familiar with this writing of Luther and since April 26, 1518, marked the 500th Anniversary of this important document, I thought we would spend a few minutes today reflecting upon a few statements from the Heidelberg Disputation (Debate). Martin Luther was a German monk who was part of the Augustinian Order. The 95 Theses got the attention of the whole Roman world and got them talking, but

Luther never got the discussion that he wanted to have about his concerns. So Luther's superior in the Augustinian order, Johann Staupitz, provided Luther the opportunity to defend and discuss his views at a general meeting of the Augustinians of Germany in Heidelberg, Germany. Staupitz encouraged Luther to stay away from the more controversial topics of the 95 Theses (indulgences, purgatory, and the pope) and instead to focus on sin, free will, grace, and good works. Luther obliged by preparing 28 theological and 12 philosophical theses, with brief explanations and he got the debate/discussion he craved in Heidelberg. I offer a few of these statements for our consideration to deepen our appreciation for how God has used people, like Martin Luther, throughout history to focus our attention on the simple truths of the Bible and Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Thesis 1 – The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.

Thesis 18 – It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

Thesis 23 – The law brings the wrath of God (Romans 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges and condemns everything that is not in Christ.

The word salutary means “beneficial or helpful.” Interesting choice of words given that the Law of God delivers the bad news. But each of us needs to hear this bad news daily. God doesn't hear your prayers because they are sincere. You can't buy your way into having a peaceful relationship with God. You won't get to Heaven because you did your best at life and will try harder the next time. God is not impressed that your sins haven't landed you in earthly jail. The law of God does not promote people, it condemns people. And that is the salutary purpose of God's law, it is the tornado siren of God to warn us that we aren't righteous (perfect, sinless) as God demands and we deserve the eternal wrath and punishment of God in Hell for our years and years of years of law breaking. Martin Luther is merely echoing the words of the Apostle Paul: **“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin...Law brings wrath...The wages of sin is death (Romans 3:19-20, 4:15a, 6:23a).”**

Thesis 25 – He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

Thesis 26 – The law says, “Do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “Believe in this,” and everything is already done.

There is nothing free in life. You have to put in the time and work hard in order to get ahead. This may be true in almost every other aspect of life, but it's not true when it comes to your relationship with God and your eternal salvation. Jesus perfectly kept every law of God when he lived on this earth and he gives you his perfection as a gift of love. Jesus earned forgiveness for every last sin when he died on the cross to experience the wrath of God against sin and he gives us this forgiveness as a gift of his love. Jesus earned Heaven for us when he rose from the dead and he gives this to us as a gift of his love. And God the Holy Spirit took spiritual corpses like us who didn't have the ability to believe in Jesus as Savior and through the Word of God he breathed life into us so that we now believe in Jesus as our Savior. When it comes to our relationship with God and our eternal salvation there is nothing we can do and nothing left for us to do because Jesus did it all. Luther is just echoing the words of the Apostle Paul: **"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus...The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 3:21-23, 6:23).

Thesis 28 – The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

A life of thankfulness is not born out of guilt, fear, pressure, and selfishness. A life of thankfulness is born of love, God's love. God gave us the gift of peace with Him, certainty of Heaven, confidence to face death, and awareness of our purpose in life through faith in Jesus. Loved by God, we now live a life of thankfulness - not because we have to, but because we WANT to and because God created us for this.

Luther is just echoing the Apostle Paul and the Apostle John: **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** (Ephesians 2:8-10). **"We love because he first loved us"** (1 John 4:19).

Does this message still excite you and fill your heart with joy? Or have we enjoyed it so long that it seems like old news? Let's not ever take this message for granted! This is our greatest treasure! This is our peace, our certainty, our confidence, our life. Let's be willing, if necessary, to be like Luther, the Apostles, and the 3 men in the fiery furnace who would rather die than give up God's gift to us through Jesus Christ. Amen.