

Today is a good day. It's Reformation Sunday! While we are immersed in the challenges and demands of everyday life – where some days we can barely get through - today we hear the message reminding us to feel good about something and take heart.

Many hold the view that it's a sin to feel good too much. We are to carry our cross, grin and bear it, maybe even try to enjoy it. Life is supposed to be hard. If something isn't going wrong, then God isn't giving us an opportunity to grow spiritually. Some believe there's great spiritual value in having to bear heavy responsibility especially when it doesn't inspire you. After all, there is that saying, "If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." How much farther need anyone look for irrefutable proof that a hard life is better than a soft one!

Where I come from in Wisconsin, it's a stout German/Norwegian territory. If you walk around too many days looking and feeling good about life, people begin to suspect things about you. Bad things. Unflattering things. "Maybe he's finally lost his mind." They say. Or, "Perhaps this time she's finally gone off the deep end."

I'm not sure how many days you're allowed to be happy without interference here in Pittsburgh. I sense it's a bit longer than in Wisconsin. Influential factors include how well the Steelers/ Penguins/ Pirates played this week, the weather, and of course road construction.

We can be happy today. Maybe it will carry through the whole week! Maybe we might make some people suspicious! Let's go ahead with it anyway.

One of the great bringers of joy is freedom. It's great to be free. Like the day when you went to the airport and flew on a big plane. It was a cloudy, rainy, nasty day. You boarded the plane, found your seat, intro'd yourself to person next to you, adjusted your seat belt. You tried to figure out whether or not the stewards looked like the type that would give you an extra biscotti cookie w/ your coffee. Finally, as attendants were giving safety instructions, the plane taxied out. It made the final turn onto the main runway. The engines roared. The going got pretty bumpy. Things began to go by very fast. As you looked out the window, the plane nosed up, you were pushed back in your seat, and up, up, up you went. Not long after, you were treated to that beautiful sight - flying above a blanket of white cotton under a beautiful blue sky with brilliant sunshine. This is a sight no king, queen, noble, or wealthy elite has ever seen until our age. You feel special. For a moment you feel free. Free from the rain, the wet, the mess down below. Free from the problems you left behind back at the airport. Free from the worries about the next part of your trip. For a moment you feel free. And you feel joy.

Is it any wonder why Jesus ascended into those clouds? Into those "heavens?" They are a place of freedom, a place of joy. Jesus is the God, the Savior of both freedom and joy. He is a Savior of freedom and joy because he is the truth. And, as Jesus says, it is the truth that will set you free.

Jesus is the truth. He is the word of truth, the voice of truth, the God of truth, and the man of truth. In Jesus' writings, in his preaching, in his life story we learn the truth. The truth is that God is a God of infinite love and compassion. He has put that love into action in human form in Jesus.

What did that love do? It set us free. Free from all those bad experiences, troubles, problems, issues that make real joy hard to come by. All those things are symptoms – symptoms of the death of the world. Plans we make - they die. Relationships w/ other people we enjoy - they die too. Opportunities we were counting on vanish into thin air. The flowers you planted in the spring are dying. Many of our loved ones are sick or dying. Others have already passed on. The day will come when you, too, will die. We live in and are surrounded by death. That's what makes it hard to be happy. We live in and are surrounded by death. But Jesus lives. He lives forever. By his

power - the truth, - the word, he makes us alive also. We were connected to the power of the truth of the word when God spoke that word to us in baptism. From the love of God put into action thru Jesus Christ we were given new and everlasting life.

We have done nothing to cause or earn this love of God. It comes to us only by the love of God and His unearned kindness toward us. It is ours only by his amazing grace. Grace is an attitude that brings about good things for others simply because the giver is good. There are no requirements, no prerequisites. There is no bill or invoice sent to you after you have been gifted with an act of grace. God's love cannot be bought. It cannot be earned thru earthly labors. There is no unspoken rule that dictates who receives grace and who doesn't. That's good news because we do not have enough to give. We are not able to do enough to receive it. It HAS to be by Grace alone. Grace is the only way.

In the middle ages, especially from the 13-1500's, many teachers in the church knew and taught this grace of God. Church authorities and governments killed most of them for their beliefs. This grace business is dangerous! After Oct 31, 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in Wittenberg, Germany, Luther was found on that track to death. He fully expected to die for his beliefs. Martin Luther, by the grace of God, was protected by elector Fedrick the Wise. He was able to produce the many writings about God's grace. It changed every church organization in the western world. It helped to spawn numerous church groups including the Lutherans as well as Anglicans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians, and even Pentecostal groups. The Roman Catholic church also underwent a transformation.

So today we celebrate the reforming light of God's grace shed upon the church, which began in earnest when Lutheran posted those 95 theses. That is the day when Luther went public with the message of God's grace. Even secular scholars mark that day and that movement as one of the most influential in modern times. It was a time when the church had a profound positive effect on society - the way it's supposed to be.

God used Martin Luther and others like him to bring a message of freedom and it caused joy in the hearts of the people. That message of freedom brought about the Reformation of the church. Evangelical preachers in America repeated that message of freedom in the colonies. As in Middle Ages, many were persecuted and died but the message of freedom could not be silenced. It helped bring about the American Revolution and the freedom in which we now stand in this country. Even so, this country and this world will end because we are still surrounded by death. So, Jesus gives us an even better gift - freedom from death forever! He promises us yet another new country, a new world yet to come.

We have been set free. That's the truth he gives us, and now we are free to live as people of grace, enjoying the pure light that God shines upon us in His word. Why return to a life of envy, hatred, needles competition, slander, and mean behavior? Why would we ever go back to the place where sorrow is stronger than hope? Where doubt overshadows faith and problems triumph over solutions? That's the place of death, but we have been called to life.

Today is Reformation Sunday! Today is a day to be happy in our hearts! God's has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. In him, we find the truth about God's love for us, and in his grace, God loves you now and forever. Amen.

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