

Luke 15:1–10
3rd Sun. after Trinity
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
June 25, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

What does it mean to be a Lutheran? On October 31st, we celebrate “Reformation Day” to commemorate Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses onto the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517. Most Protestants can get behind something like Reformation Day as a sort of Independence Day for the Church. That was the spark that really got things going. But if you actually read the 95 Theses, you’ll find much that was specific only to that time period and you’ll find several points that are downright objectionable. Luther’s thinking was still very much colored by his past. There’s a reason we don’t go to the 95 Theses first to explain to the world what it means to be a Lutheran.

The 95 Theses and Reformation Day are great, but there’s so much more to being a Lutheran. Today, June 25th, is another festival celebrating the history of the Lutheran Church, and one that has more bearing on who we are as Lutherans. On June 25th, 1530, the Lutheran rulers of the Holy Roman Empire presented their Confession of Faith to the Emperor at the Imperial Diet in Augsburg, Germany. Their goal was to show that the distinctive Lutheran doctrines and practice were not all that distinctive, but simply reflected the biblical and catholic faith passed on to us from the fathers. What we now call the Lutheran Church was at that time referred to as “the church of the Augsburg Confession.” In fact, Lutheran congregations (at least in the US) are still formally referred to as “such and such church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.”

If the 95 Theses are like the Declaration of Independence, then the Augsburg Confession is like the Constitution. The Augsburg Confession, along with the other documents in the Book of Concord, outline what we as Lutherans believe, teach and confess—and what we reject and condemn—all because we see how clearly these documents agree with the Scriptures. That’s why all Lutheran pastors pledge to teach in accordance with these documents and it’s why we offer a weekly study of the Lutheran Confessions. If we want to be Lutherans, then we ought to know our Bibles and our Confessions, because our Confessional documents simply take the message of Scripture and apply that message to issues in our world. From creeds and confessions to resolutions and various statements, the church is called upon to confess the faith in the clearest possible terms before the world. We believe, therefore we speak (2 Cor 4:13). The Augsburg Confession is one of our ways of speaking.

Of course, I don’t want to disparage the 95 Theses. They’re still great when read in their historical context. Like the Declaration of Independence, the 95 Theses are powerful, but not binding. The first of Luther’s 95 Theses reads: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” The controversy that led to the Reformation of the western catholic church began with repentance and a recognition that repentance is more than lip-service. As Christians, repentance is our entire life, a constant turning away from sin and towards our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the Augsburg Confession, we confess: “Our churches teach that there is forgiveness of sins for those who have fallen after Baptism whenever they are converted. The Church ought to impart Absolution to those who return to repentance.” This might sound obvious, but until Luther’s writings appeared, this wonderful Gospel teaching on repentance “was very much confused” (Ap XIIA:4). God’s

Word convicts us of our sin, and then offers the forgiveness of sins and righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life for the sake of Christ (Ap XIIIA 29).

In our Gospel text for today, the third Sunday after Trinity, we see that it is the LORD who brings about repentance. It's not something we can produce or manufacture in people. Like a shepherd going out to find the lost sheep, so does our LORD go out of His way to find sinners and bring them back to the fold, to lead them to repentance and faith. As the woman who lost one coin gets on her hands and knees to search for it, so does our LORD come down to us, searching for those made in His image to return them to where they belong. And so, too, does the church today lovingly pursue those who have gone missing, those who have wandered from the fold. It is our LORD who calls the lost through His Word and it is the LORD who leads the wanderers home and gives them a place at the table.

The tax collectors and public sinners, the lowest of the low, were drawing near to hear Jesus. Christianity so often has an appeal to the outcasts, the downtrodden, and the rejects of society because Christ offers a helping hand to those who have fallen and new life to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins. Christianity appeals to the weak because it emphasizes not our strength, but the strength of the one who has come to save us. The LORD is our strength, our rock and our fortress, our deliverer. He considers our afflictions and our troubles and forgives all our sins in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The LORD exalts those who are humble. He has called you to His eternal glory in Christ and will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you, as He did for all those tax collectors and sinners.

But the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled, saying: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The unrighteous are invited to receive the righteousness of Christ, but those who think they are righteous in themselves find no need to come to our LORD and receive His gifts

of forgiveness of sin, new life, and salvation. Those who are “pretty good” are tempted to think their own goodness will cover their mistakes, and so we get this irony: Sinners are welcomed while the seemingly righteous are cast out.

Once you know what to look for, you see this principle all over the place in everyday examples. If somebody is really sick, terribly sick, they’ll go to the doctor and get the help they need and maybe even come to a speedy recovery. But if somebody is ok, maybe not perfect, but not horrible either, he might avoid going to the doctor until it’s too late. That’s the way it works spiritually as well. Those who know and feel their sins run to the Great Physician, Jesus Christ, and receive the healing they need in our Lord’s Body and Blood. But those who think they’re ok, maybe not perfect, but not horrible either, are tempted to think they have no use for our LORD and the forgiveness He provides.

Or consider the example of someone who is completely ignorant in some field of knowledge. A person who knows they know nothing about a topic is willing to learn and will oftentimes soak up new material with joy and satisfaction. But someone who knows a little bit about something, or someone who thinks he already knows enough about the material, will be so overconfident he won’t be able to learn anything new. One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet” (Prov 27:7). So it goes with the spiritual gifts God has prepared for us as well. The LORD has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away (Luke 1:52–53). This man, Jesus, receives sinners and eats with them, and that’s wonderful news!

The parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin show us what repentance looks like from God’s perspective. Our LORD leaves no stone unturned when it comes to saving sinners. He is

the Good Shepherd who comes out in search of His lost sheep. The sheep don't just wander back into the fold; the Shepherd has to go find them. In Jesus Christ, God became man to seek and save the lost. He came into the world to bring us lost sinners home, by laying down His life for the sheep. When Christians wander away after Baptism, our LORD is continually calling to them through His Word in the Church: "Come home! Return to the fold! Come and be nourished and sustained unto life everlasting!" When a Christian falls into sin, our LORD comes seeking for us in His Word. He cries out to us: "Remember who you are in Holy Baptism. You have fallen into sin, but I am here to forgive you your sins." And so there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine seemingly righteous persons who don't think they need repentance.

In the parable of the lost coin, we see a picture of our LORD descending from Heaven and entering the muck and mire of our dirty, fallen world. This isn't like the penny that falls under the seat in your car, where you might reach down to feel for it, but will give up after a few seconds. All people are made in God's image. It's stamped onto us; we belong to Him, and so our LORD spares no effort trying to bring us back to where we belong. He lights the lamp of His Holy Word to seek for that which has been lost, preaching to us the Law that reveals our fallen, sinful condition and preaching to us the Gospel, the good news that God has done everything to bring us back to Him. God sweeps away the fears and the doubts and anything that might be keeping us out of sight, and then He returns us to where we belong with joy. In fact, He is so excited that He throws us a party every time we gather together for Divine Service. Every Sunday and festival day is God's celebration of sinners being called to repentance, where He prepares for us the feast of His Body and Blood so we can receive into our mouths the fruit of

His sacrifice on the cross, a foretaste of the continual feasting going on in heaven with the holy angels and the saints who have gone before us.

As Christians, we know that our LORD has done everything to seek and save us, the lost, and so we, too, spare no time or expense in pursuing those who have fallen away from the Church or who have never experienced the joy there is in life with God. We rejoice and thank God for having called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9). We rejoice that this man, Jesus, receives sinners and eats with them. We believe these things, and so we speak about them, we confess this truth with our lips. And so we help our fellow-sinners to obtain that same grace and that same joy, using God's Word to call to repentance from sin, and to faith in Jesus Christ. So make sure to go home and read the Augsburg Confession today. Like the Christians in Antioch who received the letter from the Council of Jerusalem, rejoice because of its encouragement (Acts 15:31), so that you in turn may be able share that encouragement with whomever God may bring into your life, and to proclaim that same faith before all the world. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.