

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021
“The Power of a Preposition” (Romans 3:22)

Today, Bible translations are commonplace. We have not only translations into almost every known language but also translations geared to specific cultural purposes. [The “Inclusive” Bible] So we tend to forget what a revolution Martin Luther began--a reformation, if you will--when he opened his laptop in 1521, I mean, got out his pen, and began to translate the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew into German. With the marvelous of the printing press, for the first time EVER God’s Word became widely available to people in their own language.

Until then, for the most part the truth of Jesus Christ had remained a closely guarded secret, if you can imagine that. For a thousand years scripture had been heard exclusively in Latin, the official language of the church. This meant that only priests and scholars had any idea what it said, which is how a priest like Johann Tetzel could get away with selling indulgences and telling people that these payments would help their dead loved ones avoid the fires of hell.

The point of Luther’s 95 theses was to systematically demonstrate how the Catholic Church had been taking advantage of its people. We just heard Luther come at the Pope with thesis number 86, which goes: "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"

But I would like to make the case that it was not the distribution of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 but the publication in 1534 of Luther’s vigorous translation of the Bible that catapulted the Reformation into history as a movement that changed the Western world. Why? Because in making God’s Word available to the people it broke the Church’s domination over their lives for purposes of power and profit. It’s worth saying too that Luther's goal of a readable, accurate translation of the Bible also started the movement toward universal education, so that everyone could read the Bible for themselves.

Just as Luther did, we are still wrestling with fine points of translation. Every word matters, down to the smallest preposition. Today we are looking at Romans 3:22 and the preposition ‘in.’ Paul is talking about the new thing that God has done through Jesus Christ, that God is making available to us “the righteousness of God through faith IN Jesus Christ for all who believe.” But should this be IN Christ, or FROM Christ? As it happens, there is a lively controversy here. The Greek can mean either *in* or *from*. So which is it, and why do we care?

We care because it has to do with what Paul is telling us about our relationship with Jesus.

Prepositions are used in front of nouns to describe the relationship between that noun and other words in the sentence. Faith “in” Jesus sounds like something we are supposed to be doing, as in “Have faith in him!”, meaning “If only your faith was stronger!”

But the righteousness of God coming to us through faith FROM Jesus Christ places us as a recipient of God’s gracious action through his Son. There is nothing we need to do. Faith comes to us from him as a grace-filled gift from God--regardless of, or in spite of, whatever we have done or left undone.

It is generally considered that Martin Luther’s great breakthrough was that faith alone can save us, rather than anything we might try to do. He actually inserted that word, “alone,” into Romans 3:28. [Luther Bible] But just as great was Luther’s realization that faith is not a work that we can accomplish. The growth of faith in each human heart is God’s work. There is nothing anyone can do to increase their faith or assure their own salvation, which is why the disciples cry out to Jesus in Luke 17, “Lord, increase our faith!” when Jesus tells them how many times they have to forgive their enemies. They realize this is way beyond what they are capable of on their own. This is why faith comes to us FROM Jesus, not IN him.

In all matters of faith, as in life and death, we are utterly dependent on God’s gracious action through his Son. For Luther, Christian freedom is therefore means total obedience--to trust God completely. This is the truth Jesus is telling the disciples about in John 8: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

I was looking for an image to describe what this freedom through obedience feels like. Friday when it was very windy I saw a hawk circling above me, although I think he might have actually had his eye on our dog. Using the strong air currents, the hawk executed the most spectacular patterns around us with no discernible effort on its part.

This is our life in Christ. Let go of fear, trust in him, and be carried by the powerful currents of the Holy Spirit. Let go of whatever keeps you locked in the cycle of sin and shame. Let go of the fear that you are not good enough. Let go of the fear that you are not worthy of God’s love. Let go of the fear that you are not measuring up to expectations. Let go of the fear that you have let people down. Let go of the fear of rejection that keeps you isolated from others. Let go of the fear that God has called you in a way you think you are not equipped to handle. You ARE worthy. You ARE loved. You ARE beautifully equipped.

Let go of all those things that disrupt your flight or threaten to send you crashing down. What if that hawk had fought the east wind with all the power in his body? He probably wouldn’t have lasted long. Instead, believe and be carried by what God has done for you that comes to us from God’s Son. Believe in the One who called you relationship at your baptism and will never, ever let you go. Believe in him because he is the truth of our world, the truth of the cosmos. Believe, and this truth WILL set you free.

Amen.