

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**  
**Watertown, WI**  
Reformation Sunday, 2011  
Rev. David K. Groth

It seemed like a good idea at the time. This summer Kathy Wagner and I were making plans for our stewardship emphasis. We would use three consecutive Sundays, with the third being the culmination (the one with the meals after the services). Realistically around here you have to be mindful of deer season and Packer games. So we first established the date. November 13<sup>th</sup> looked like a good day for the culmination. The Packers play Monday night. Deer season hasn't yet begun in earnest. The 13<sup>th</sup> looked good. Working back on the calendar that meant today would be our first stewardship emphasis.

Having settled that, Kathy and I started thinking about a theme. We had three Sundays to work with. Three. Triune. Trinity. There we have it! We'll do a series on Christian stewardship as it relates to the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Our meeting was over, and we both felt good about what we accomplished.

Fast forward to this past Monday morning. I looked at my calendar and by gum it's also Reformation. It snuck up on me this year. I know . . . it shouldn't have, but it did. So now for a sermon assignment we have the 1<sup>st</sup> Article of the Creed, Stewardship, Reformation. You try writing a sermon on that! It's like trying to make a nice meal out of garlic, oranges and Kraut. "Can't be done" I finally conceded. So this is what we are going to do. We're going to treat them separately and sing a hymn in between. And we're going to plan better next year. Next Sunday, by the Way, is the Second Article of the Creed, Stewardship, and All Saints Sunday!

**"Be Still"**

"Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

As the fifteenth century came to a close, it was clear the church was in need of profound reformation. The papacy had become corrupt. (At one point there were two, even three popes, all claiming to be the genuine article.) Powerful ecclesiastical positions were purchased and sold like stock on Wall Street. The celibacy of the clergy was mocked by bishops and priests flaunting their illegitimate children. "Even the halls of the Vatican", my history professor said, "heard the pitter patter of little feet." It wasn't just a problem of ethics. It was a problem of faith. Forgetting the cross, people were putting their faith into the veneration of relics, the purchase of indulgences, the adoration of Mary, the requisite pilgrimages.

Meanwhile, Pope Leo X down there in Rome was thinking about his legacy. His plan was to resume the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, which still stands on Vatican Square in Rome. It would cost money, a lot of it. So Leo ordered the sale of indulgences across Europe with the profits going toward the construction of St. Peter's. In Germany, the man put in charge of these sales was an unscrupulous fellow by the name Johann Tetzel. He wasn't much of a theologian but he was a heck of a salesman. He and his preachers were heard announcing the indulgences they sold made the sinner "cleaner than when coming out of baptism," and "cleaner

than Adam before the Fall.” You could even buy them for dead people. “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs” Tetzelsaid.

What all these things share (the indulgences, the pilgrimages, the veneration of relics) what they all share is the notion that if you are to be saved, there are some things you need to do to improve your chances. And people bought it, hook, line and sinker, even as they shelled out their hard earned cash for indulgences and relics and pilgrimages.

None of it sat well with an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther. So on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517 Luther posted 95 theses about corruption within the church, taking careful aim at the sale of indulgences. Forgiveness cannot be sold. It cannot be purchased with our gold or silver, but only with the blood of Christ. It was the first well aimed shot of many that he would take.

That was the front edge of the Reformation. By the time it was all over, those consciences troubled because they could not afford indulgences were calmed by the proclamation of the Gospel. Those terrified by the thought of purgatory were comforted by the assurance of salvation in Christ. Those worrying about whether they’d done enough to make the cut on the Last Day were quieted by the news we are saved by grace, not works. The religious landscape went through a remarkable transformation in a very short time.

Over the centuries since, the church has suffered relapses. Paul likens it to a dog returning to its vomit. Today, just like five hundred years ago, the trend is to put man in charge of his own salvation. Grace isn’t enough. There must be something man has to do. So today, many Christians have been lead to believe faith is a decision, something they do, rather than a gift of the Holy Spirit worked through his Word. Many believe baptism is a commitment they make to God, rather than a promise, a covenant he makes to us. Many believe communion is merely a human act of remembrance, rather than the body and blood of Jesus given for our forgiveness. Many believe a worship service is primarily the work of man, singing to God, praising him, praying to him. It is all those things for sure, but first and foremost it is Divine Service, God serving us, God feeding us with his Word and Sacrament.

There’s something scandalous about grace, so, almost instinctively, it seems, we drift away from it and we get it into their heads that we are responsible for our own salvation.

“Be still” says the Lord, “and know that I am God.” There’s not one little thing you need to do to be saved. There’s not one big thing you have done that disqualifies you from God’s salvation. “Be still and know that I am God” he says. He’s the one who works out your salvation. He’s the one who died on the cross for your sins. He’s the one who baptized you, and gave you faith, and gives you his body and blood. He’s the one who loves you. And let me say it right now, up front, at the onset of this stewardship campaign: With your money, you cannot make God love you one bit more than he already does. Don’t begin to think that God can be bought off with gold or silver.

Be still and know that he is God. This battle for salvation is not yours to fight. It is his and he has already fought it, and already won. Therefore, as the Lord promised in Isaiah, “in rest is your salvation. In quietness and trust is your strength” (Is. 30:15). Be still, and know that he is God. Amen.

## **“Dominion”**

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’ (Gen. 1:28).

In the Genesis account of creation, after everything is finished, and he has declared it all “very good”, then God does the most remarkable thing. He steps back from his precious creation and hands it over to man. He gives us dominion over his creation. It’s as if he says, “Here. Take good care of it. It’s for you to use.” Would you ever give the keys of a brand new Porsche to a brand new driver? In effect, God did so much more when he entrusted to us his good creation. What a gift! What a responsibility!

Now, God never intended that we use our dominion to crassly exploit his creation in such a way that future generations won’t be able to benefit from it. It was not God’s will that we trash his creation, pollute it, abuse it any more than you would want that new driver to be taking the new Porsche off road for a joy ride. When we abuse God’s creation, we fall under his judgment and need to repent. But not even that abuse stops God from entrusting his creation to us. Moreover, he created it in such a way that it is so willing to produce and work for us.

I thought about that when we went to the State Fair. The horse barn is always a must. I love the big work horses, the Belgians and the Clydesdales. For many centuries, they have worked for us so willingly. I really don’t know why. They’re big enough to say no. But they have kept saying yes, even at the end of a long day of plowing in the field, even in the dark . . . they keep saying yes.

And the soil they plowed keeps saying yes. I too have a garden out here in our community gardens. It got away from me this summer. Mine was the worst looking garden in the bunch. The young squash plants were fighting for their lives, competing with weeds for space and sunlight and moisture. I didn’t expect much from them. How could I? Yet my neglected, derelict patch produced dozens of beautiful squash.

Even the bees are willing to work for us. We call ourselves beekeepers, but I’ve learned no one really keeps bees. They do their own thing when they want to do it. And though yes, we do get stung occasionally, most of them are pretty docile. When I get stung I remind myself that tens of thousands decided not to sting me that day, even though we were blowing smoke in their faces, and prying apart their homes, and taking their food. It’s all part of the gift God gave when he gave us dominion “over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

And so chickens lay eggs for us, and cows and goats willingly, even eagerly give us their milk, and sheep consent to their wool being sheared, and sugar maples run with sweet sap, and dogs quiver at the chance to retrieve a fallen goose, and tomato plants produce so prodigiously that you start looking forward to a killing frost. It’s all part of the gift that God gave when he gave us dominion.

“For all this” Luther says, “It is our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.” When someone gives you a great gift, you say thank you. Returning thanks to God is not done just with words. In Leviticus 27, God introduced to Moses the concept of the tithe. Ten percent

of whatever the land produced was holy to the Lord (v. 30). In 2 Chronicles 31, we read “As soon as the command was spread abroad, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field. And they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything . . . also the tithe of cattle and sheep.” When you give thanks to God, it’s not just with words. No, your skin is in the game.

Ten percent is the Old Testament standard, and it sounds like an awful lot. How could I ever afford that? Do you remember that sermon illustration used years ago by Pastor Wayne Schroeder? This is our daily bread. Let this loaf represent everything God gives us to sustain our bodies and lives. It’s your income too.

Now, I understand the average Lutheran gives about two or three percent. This is what that looks like. If we were to tithe . . . if we were to give ten percent, this is what that looks like. And that’s a sizeable chunk isn’t it? “Nothing to sneeze at” my wife would say. But remember this: the whole thing is a gift from God. Everything you need to sustain your body and life he gives, “and he does this only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me” said Luther. It’s all gift. And with the tithe God is saying “How about you keep this much for your own use, for the things you need and the things you want, but how about you give this much back for me to use, for my work in the world, for the work of my kingdom on earth, so that my Word can be proclaimed and children can learn of my grace and so my church can flourish and grow? Does that sound fair enough? You keep this (the 90%), but would you be willing to give back this (the 10%)?”

In Genesis, God took a great big step back and handed his creation over and said, “Here, this is for you, for your needs, for you to use. Take good care of it. Be a steward of it.” And you know what? He’s still doing that . . . in your life and mine. This [loaf] is for you. This is your daily bread, your income, your house and home. It’s everything, and we believe, teach and confess it all comes from God as a gift. And it’s for you to use as you see best. You have dominion over it. You are its steward. What a gift! What a responsibility! In terms of tithing, of course, he gives you the freedom to say no and he’ll still love you. But he also gives you the freedom to say, “Yes” just like those horses, even though they don’t have to. He gives you opportunity to give back, and to serve, and to say, “Thank you, Lord.” Amen.

LSB 806 “Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart”