

GOD'S WORD IS OUR GREAT HERITAGE PS 119:111 **YOUR STATUES ARE MY HERITAGE FOREVER, THEY ARE THE JOY OF MY HEART! 3-7-17**

My dear friends in the Lord,

We are in the middle of the Lenten season, so I'd like to take some time to wish you a happy anniversary! Not 25<sup>th</sup>, or 40<sup>th</sup>, or 50<sup>th</sup> but 500<sup>th</sup>! Of course, what I am referring to is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation which we are celebrating this year. 500 years ago, Martin Luther on Oct. 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. It is the Reformation which restored the beautiful Lenten message "It is finished" - and Jesus did it all - as the central teaching in the Christian church. Now we are heirs of the Reformation! We have God's pure Word as the only basis for saving faith as the authority for living life. God's Word - straight up, no additions, no subtractions - is the great heritage that is ours. That's why we're celebrating all 2017 with special (Lenten) services, special Bible studies, area rallies: and even a new movie called "Return to Grace" - *the Life and Legacy of Martin Luther* which we pre-screen right here in Appleton. So as part of that celebration I'd like to direct you to God's Word in Ps. 119:111: "**YOUR STATUES ARE MY HERITAGE FOREVER, THE JOY OF MY HEART!**" We'll use a favorite Reformation hymn title as our theme: GOD'S WORD IS OUR HERITAGE. It's the most precious heritage you've ever received, and 2) it's the most precious heritage you could possibly leave.

Have you ever thought of God's Word as a "heritage" you have received? That's how the psalmist presents it - the Hebrew word has the connotation of an inheritance passed down like land was passed down - from one generation to the next; a treasure to stay in the family. If you are like many people I work with Christian estate planning, you may already have identified a "heritage" you want to pass down to future generations. When I ask, "what are some of the things you want to accomplish with your will, some folks answer quickly - "we want to pass on the family farm; it's been in the family for generations"! Or "Our kids love our cabin on the lake. We've got to keep that in the family!" Some think of sentimental treasures, like great grandma's wedding ring. Recently one man said, "We've had Packer season tickets since the ice bowl - we've got to keep them in the family! Maybe you already know of something you would like to pass on as a heritage to your family?"

God has given us a lot of blessings. But there is one heritage which is far more important than all of them, isn't there? It's far more important than the family farm, even more important than Packer tickets! This heritage is the precious Word of God. Remember what Jesus said? **MAN DOES NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT COMES FROM THE MOUTH OF GOD.** It's so vital we can't live without it! While Mary was listening to Jesus teach while Martha was too busy in the kitchen, what did Jesus tell Martha? "**IT'S THE ONE THING NEEDFUL**". Through his word, God reveals to us who he really is. Through his word, he tells us

who Jesus really is! And through his Word he tells us what the way to heaven really is! What's more important than that?

You see, before the Reformation God's Word had all but disappeared from among the people. The Church didn't guard it and treasure it like a precious diamond to pass on from generation to generation. God's Word and the saving Gospel it proclaimed languished in a dusty corner while, the decrees of Popes and councils took center stage. Man-made rituals became dominated worship. The focus of lent became what "I could give up for God" - not what Jesus has given up for me. The Church didn't appreciate the heritage it had received, and made little effort to pass it on.

But God had other plans. Out of pure grace, he led Martin Luther and others to dig into the Bible, to study it and really digest what God had to say! As Jesus said (Mt. 24), **HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, BUT MY WORDS WILL NEVER PASS AWAY.** God had seen to it that His Word was passed down since the beginning of time from generation to generation. And now, despite of painful persecution, despite of ecclesiastical apathy, despite of the cunning schemes of Satan himself, God would keep his promise again. He used Luther to translate the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures into the language of the people. With the invention of the printing press just at that time Bibles were published and spread across the land.

Have you ever held a Bible in your own hands? That's your reformation heritage. Have you ever read a bible in your own language? That's your reformation heritage. When you come to church, do you hear God's Word in your own language, and not in Latin? Do you hear a sermon centered on God's Word? Do you enjoy joining together with fellow Christians to sing the hymns? It's all part of your Reformation. Heritage! Like beggars at a banquet, we feast on a smorgasbord of Bibles from Bible stories to study Bibles and devotional Bibles. The bookstores are full of them! We have all kinds of Bible resources from Bible studies and daily devotions to Bible dictionaries and commentaries. And not just for the clergy, but for *all of us* to explore and enjoy. All part of our Reformation heritage!

But what really makes God's Word **the** most precious heritage a person could ever receive? It is the message it contains! Luther risked his life to proclaim it: **Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, based on Scripture alone!** *Grace! Faith! Scripture!* This teaching was so radical at Luther's time it could get you killed! You see, the church had come to teach that *you must do something* to earn God's favor; you must do something to get to heaven: You could pray more, you could pay more, you could do more penance, you could do more good works. - all these things were necessary and all these things helped. And doesn't it seem reasonable? The more nice things you do for God the more likes you, right? Who

would ever guess that there is **nothing** anyone can do to earn God's favor? Even if you tried your very best? Even if you were the nicest person on earth? Even if you gave a zillion dollars to the church or worked all your life in a slum to serve the poor? Doesn't that sound reasonable? Who wouldn't raise your hand for that? Aren't we tempted to think that way? If I do this...God will like me!

But we have the heritage of God's Word! And what does **God's Word** say? **Ps. 24:4 WHO MAY ASCEND THE HILL OF THE LORD? WHO MAY STAND IN HIS HOLY PLACE? HE WHO HAS CLEAN HANDS AND A PURE HEART!** Is that me? Is that you? Is that anyone you know? Jesus said, **BE PERFECT, EVEN AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS PERFECT! (Mt. 5:48)** Is that me? Is that you? Is that anyone you know? So surveying humanity God declares: (RM 3:10, 23) **THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE. ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD.** That's God's Word, too! You see, no matter how much you try, no matter how much I try, before the holy and righteous God we'll always be a day late and a dollar short. The old saying is true: *-nobody's perfect!!* Nobody's righteous – not even one. We all have earned sin's wages. We all deserve damnation in hell – even for just one sin! That's why Luther said he "hated God"! He knew he couldn't be perfect and therefore God must damn him! How could he love such a God?!

**But God** did something about it. All that needs to be done has been done! God sent his son Jesus to gain the righteousness Luther needed and you need and I need so desperately. Jesus lived that perfect life for us: Perfect love for God - all the time; perfect love for neighbor – even enemies – all the time. Not a single sin. And then he went to the altar of the cross to offer that perfect life as total payment for the sin. So now in Jesus **"THOUGH YOUR SINS BE LIKE SCARLET, THEY SHALL BE AS WHITE AS SNOW" Is. 1:18** That's the message of God's Word. That's the message of Lent. Do you see how the Psalmist can say (this is) **THE JOY OF MY HEART?**

And it is all credited to us by faith! The light went on for Luther when he discovered the basic truth of Romans 1:17 **THE RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH** By faith! Not works. Not part works and part faith. By faith alone! By faith we receive Jesus' righteousness draped all over us....by faith we receive Jesus' forgiveness showered down upon us.!

And how do you get faith? Only one way. God's Word tells us: **FAITH COMES FROM HEARING THE MESSAGE, AND THE MESSAGE IS HEARD THROUGH THE WORD OF CHRIST (RM 10:17).** John the Baptist proclaimed it simply: **WHOEVER BELIEVES IN THE SON HAS ETERNAL LIFE (Jn 3:36).** Paul said: **BY GRACE WE ARE SAVED THROUGH FAITH....! (Eph 2)** Would any of you have known this except through the heritage of God's word? **YOUR STATUES --THE JOY OF MY HEART!**

So isn't it obvious? *If God's Word is the most precious heritage you have ever received! Then isn't it also the most precious heritage you can possibly leave?* Satan would love to have us think of farms, cabins, IRAs and Packer tickets as the most precious heritage to leave to our loved ones. Tempting to think that way, right? But how can you love our family any better than by passing the Word of God to them so they can join you in heaven? It's the most precious heritage you and I can possibly leave!

That's why I've been asked to serve at Mount Olive this (morning). My Ministry offers help with Christian estate planning. Yes, we talk about passing down houses and farms, life insurance and retirement funds; pictures and even Packer tickets. But most importantly, Christian estate planning includes ways to pass down the heritage of God's Word!

Let me give you a few examples. We like to start wills with a Christian Preamble. It is a heartfelt confession of faith and a comfort for those we leave behind. My wife and I consider it the last devotion we will have with our children. It might contain your favorite Bible passages, encouragement to stay close to Jesus, and powerfully give witness to faith.

Or maybe God has blessed you with young children. Christian estate planning enables YOU - not the state of WI - to choose Christian guardians who will raise your children. Guardians who will read those Bible stories at bedtime, teach those little hands to fold and pray at meals; who will show their love for Jesus by the way they worship and by the way they live. Do you remember the words Luther put at the front of the *catechism*? **"As the head of the family should teach in the simplest way to those in his household."** Passing on the heritage of God's Word.

Grandparents can use Christian estate planning to pass on the heritage of God's Word to their grandchildren. They could create a trust to help support their grandchildren's Christian education. They could arrange a bequest for their church or ALHS so their grandchildren and great grandchildren will have a place to go for worship and to find Jesus in the classroom.

Recently I had the privilege of helping a dear Christian woman up in Rhinelander arrange a bequest from life insurance. She has never been out of the country. But her bequest would go to endow for scholarships for young men and women studying to be pastors and teachers. She wanted workers to pass on that heritage she had received– not only at her church, but throughout the world as these young people would serve as missionaries and mission teachers! Well trained young men and women to China, India and Indonesia! Or maybe to the smiling little faces in the Lutheran preschool just down the street.

My friends, It's true: "God's Word is our great heritage!" More precisely, "God's Word is our **greatest** heritage!" To sinners like us it's **THE JOY OF OUR HEARTS, isn't it?** So especially during this Lenten season when we treasure Jesus' declaration **"It is finished!"** Thank God for the Reformation: Grace. Faith. Scripture. Appreciate that most precious heritage God has given you. Do all **you** can to pass it on to your loved ones...and to generations yet unborn. Amen!