#### The Pharisees were at it again, trying to do something about this man Jesus who was gathering bigger and bigger crowds around him. Now he was telling people ridiculous things like he was the bread that came down from heaven and the source of living water. This Jesus had the audacity to heal on the Sabbath, to speak words of compassion to a Samaritan woman, to cleanse the temple in Jerusalem and to proclaim that he did all these things in the name of the one who sent him, his Father in heaven. When people started to call Jesus the Messiah, the authorities knew it was time to stop him. So the Pharisees and the chief priests sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. The police officers came back empty handed, for they had heard Jesus speak and were mesmerized by what he was saying. Little could they know that they did not arrest him because Jesus' time had not yet come, that Jesus was on a schedule set by his Father.

The Pharisees were frustrated and angry with Jesus. He was acting with an authority that they had not bestowed upon him. They wondered if Jesus was possessed by some sort of demon. Their hostility toward him grew as they sought the right time and place to make the arrest and carry out the rest of their plan. The resolve of the Pharisees deepened when they heard Jesus talk about truth and sin and freedom. “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone,” they responded to Jesus in righteous indignation. Of course, the Pharisees were forgetting the literal slavery their ancestors had endured over the ages – Egypt, Babylon and their current status in the Roman Empire. They could not see the sin that had taken root in their hearts and the aching need they had for Jesus to forgive that sin and set them free.

“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,” Jesus tells. Paul puts it this way: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” There is no way around it. We are all sinners – God's broken, flailing, confused children lashing out at one another, each of us at the same time hurting others and being hurt by them. Whether by carelessness or intention, we have the power to inflict great harm upon one another. Left to our own devices, we would destroy all our relationships. We would trample upon those who lie helpless under our feet. We would destroy all that is good in God's creation.

As God's rightful heir, Jesus has the power to pronounce us free, to break the chains that sin has around us and to grant us the gift of abundant life. Jesus went to the cross for this – he absorbed all the wretchedness of our sin so that we could live in the freedom of his love, not trapped by what has happened to us or by what we have done. We are free from our failures, from the bad choices we have made, from our selfishness and callousness, from our eagerness to turn to hostility instead of fiercely seeking the way of peace. As a Church, we are free from our petty divisions, from our unwillingness to work with one another, from our tendency to worship our own traditions above God, from our failure to tend to the most needy in our midst.

In Jesus, God forgives the collective sin of a broken and fallen world, just as God forgives the sin within each one of us. This transaction is what Martin Luther called the good news of the “happy exchange.” God in Christ takes our sin, and we get his righteousness. We are free, fully free and off the hook. Luther wrote, “Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? “Jesus,” Luther wrote, “you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and you have given to me what I was not.” God is in the business of saving sinners. This frees us to receive his salvation as a gift and to live life to its fullest.

For most of my life, I have understood this amazing grace of God through a small sliver of grace in my childhood. I was maybe 8 or 9 and I had done something wrong, something I don't remember; most likely tormenting my younger brother in some way. I was sent to my room to “think about what I had done.” Rather than dwell on what I had done wrong, since my brother obviously deserved what he got, I thought instead about how long I'd have to stay in my room and what was going to happen to me when I got out. Finally, my mother called to me that it was OK to come out of my room. When I did, it was with a sense of dread, for I was anticipating a second round of punishment worse than the first. I crept into the living room, where my mom was sitting on the couch watching TV. She motioned for me to come and sit by her. I slowly walked over there and sat beside her. Then my mother laid me down on the couch beside her, held my head in her lap, stroked my hair and said, “I don't like what you did, but I still love you.” Since that day I have had a sense that God's love was like that of my mother on that childhood day, that God holds me and comforts me when I sin against God and others. That image has served me pretty well, but I see now that I have underestimated God. God takes a parent's tender love and multiplies it by a number so high we cannot even imagine it. God doesn't just forgive our sin. God doesn't even *remember* our sin. That means we begin each day with a clean slate, free to go out with boldness, confidence and joy. There is no doubt that we will make mistakes, but God will always set us back in the right direction and God will never, ever stop loving us.

Luther wrote: “A Christian is free and in bondage to no one.” Yet, at the same time, he said, “A Christian is a servant, and owing a duty to everyone.” Sin, according to Luther, is being curved in on one's self without a thought for God or the neighbor. We can't help our neighbor when we are absorbed by our own real and perceived hurts and blind to the hurts of others. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross allows us to uncurve our spines and stand tall, to breathe in the fresh, sweet air of forgiveness, to stretch out our arms in welcome, to give us a voice to ask our neighbor, “How may I help you?”

God in Christ has chosen to call us beloved children, holy and precious in God’s sight. It's crazy, irrational – something we don't deserve. But that's the upside-down, unworldly logic of God. We don't have to do anything – not a single, solitary thing – to earn God's love. For God loves us freely and completely in spite of who we are and because of who we are – cherished children of God's creation. And so we are free. Free to risk and serve and help and care and try and struggle and laugh and cry, free to love others because God loves us. In case you ever wonder why you're here on this planet, this is it. To be perfectly loved and to love. And however awkward, halting or imperfect our love may be, it is beautiful in the eyes of God.

*Reformation 2015*

*October 25, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 8: 31-36*