It's understandable for us on Reformation Sunday to remember the leader of the European reformation, the man after whom our denomination is named. We give God thanks today for Martin Luther's courage, for his bold challenge of the church of his time and for the great faith that sustained him until the day he died. Martin Luther would probably hate all the fuss that's been made over him for all these years and would certainly despise all the attention he is going to get in 2017, the 500th anniversary of his posting of 95 criticisms of the church. When Luther found out that people who broke away from the Roman Church were following him and calling themselves Lutherans, he had this to say: “What is Luther? The teaching is certainly not mine! I haven't been crucified for anybody! How could it then come to pass that Christ's children should be called by my name – poor stinking bag of worms that I am? I am no one's master and I don't intend to be. I hold, along with everyone else, the common teaching of Jesus Christ, who alone is our master.”

Martin Luther never wanted to break away from the church he so dearly loved. He certainly did not want to be the father of a movement or have his name attached to what are now millions of people around the world. But when he saw that the gospel of Jesus Christ was being compromised by the leaders of the church, Luther felt he had no choice. If Luther wanted to be remembered for anything, it would be his efforts to point to the saving power of God in Christ. His angry words about the selling of indulgences, his efforts to educate people and then place the scriptures in their hands, his insistence that the clergy make the sacraments available to those they served – all were aimed at breaking down the barriers between the Word of God and those for whom it was intended. If Luther *were* here today, I suspect he wild say that the Reformation was all about getting back to basics. And he would make sure we understood the ongoing need for reformation in the church today. For it is precisely when we stray from the basics that we cease to be what and who God created us to be.

What a contrast the basics of life in God provide to the key principles of the world around us! Our culture tells us our lives are all about what we can do for ourselves. Our faith tells us our lives are about what God has done for us. The love of God which has brought us into existence is a dynamic, creative force. It has the power to create, to nurture, and to forgive, no matter how far we ever stray from it. God's love is so great and so pure that we do not even have the words to describe it, but that does not stop us from trying.

An old, simple story gives us a glimpse into the love of our amazing God. A little boy made a boat and took it with him to the river to play. The boat drifted out of the shallow waters and into the stream where it was soon carried far beyond the little boy's reach. The boy knew he would never see his little boat again. Time passed. Then one day the little boy saw his own boat on display in a store window. He rushed into the store to see how he could recover it. The storekeeper explained that the only way he could get the boat back was to pay the price which was marked on it. The boy emptied his pockets onto the counter, counted his coins and realized he didn't have enough. He ran home to his father to get additional money, then ran back to the store. His heart rejoiced as he paid the price and reclaimed his own boat. As he walked out of the store, the boy held his boat close and said, “Now, little boat, you are twice mine – you are mine because I made you and mine because I bought you!”

Luther knew that we are God's because God made us and because God bought us, paying the highest price imaginable in the blood of God's own Son. Through Christ, God's new covenant with God's people has been born in us. Through Christ, we have been graced with a living love which reaches out to every lost soul which could not on its own find God or know true forgiveness.

Martin Luther struggled long and hard with his own sinfulness. He never believed he had adequately confessed all his sins before God and never thought he had done all that was required of him. It was only after years of struggle and baring his sin before God that the light began to dawn for Luther and he started to comprehend God's response to human sin. He wrote, “God's mercy is my justification. When I had realized this, I felt myself absolutely born again. The gates of paradise had been flung open and I had entered. There and then the whole of scripture took on another look for me.” Luther was on the path to understanding the words of Jesus to those who said they believed in him. “And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Luther began to experience the freedom that God offers to all believers through Christ. The freedom of accepting forgiveness for our sins, though we certainly do not deserve it. The freedom of having the shackles of sin unbound so we can receive and respond to God's love. There are lots of other ways to say it, but the basics remain the same: God loves us with a love unmatched in the universe – in fact, we are twice loved, created by God and ransomed from the power of sin. We are forgiven through the blood of Jesus, in whom we find true freedom. We are free to place ourselves in Jesus' hands, confident that the will lead us where he wants us to go. We are free to live as Jesus' followers in a culture where people often pick and choose their principles to suit themselves. We are free to trade in personal gain and suspicion of those around us for servant living and love of neighbor. We are free to place our mistakes, our brokenness and our fears in the hands of the One who will show us another, more life-giving way.

God gives the gift of freedom to individuals. God also gives it to the body of Christ. When Jesus spoke to the Jews who believed in him, he told them to continue in his word, to know the truth and to accept the freedom in that truth. The people did not understand him, for they did not think they needed to be freed. As descendants of Abraham, they did not think they had ever been slaves to anyone. They could not see that their sinfulness had separated them from all that God wished them to have and to be. That happens to us, too, sometimes. When we willfully ignore God's Word, when we plow forward with our own plans, never stopping to wonder if they are God's plans for us, when we pretend that we own the church and not God, when we fail to confess our brokenness, we, too, separate ourselves from the love that seeks to heal and guide us, from our generation to the next and the next.

Again, Luther's words: “God in his gracious kindness has given us the vale of this world, his holy, precious Word, his own dear Son...He will continue as God and Creator long after we are dead and gone. He was there before we appeared at the scene. To the end of time he will continue to gather to himself a little flock, and he will uphold it.”

You and I are part of that little flock. We are created by God and bought by Christ, held close by our Creator and then set free to sail another day. Free indeed!

Amen.

*Reformation Day 2016*

*October 30, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*John 8:31-36*