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From Groans to Grace

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**Texts: Romans 1:17; Ephesians 2:8; Romans 8:22 and
23**

We are here because of two birthdays.

We are celebrating today the *One hundredth*
birthday of St. John's, Arnprior.

But we are able to celebrate St. John's birthday,
because of a much earlier birthday;
the birth of a baby called Martin.

Martin Luther was born 506 years ago
on November 10, 1483.

We are here for another reason.

The reason is that this Martin grew up;

and at age 34, 472 years ago
on October 31, 1517,

he nailed 95 statements, 95 theses,
to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Because of those nails in that door
pastors and parishioners of the Ottawa Valley
are gathered here to celebrate
the Festival of the Reformation.

Now we're celebrating something

that happened almost 500 years ago.

but to you and me it is still alive and exciting
because it touches the heart-beat of *our* faith and life.

My theme for this reformation reflection is:

From Groans to Grace.

This young Martin became a very good student.

By age 22 he was a gifted young law student.

His father wanted him to become a lawyer.

But at age 22, July 17, 1505

quite unexpectedly he applied for admission
to a monastery, the Black Cloister in Erfurt.

This was a monstrous shock to his family and friends.

Thirty four years later at an evening meal

Luther reminisced about that fateful decision.

Fourteen days before his decision to enter a monastery
he was on the road north of Erfurt.

He was so frightened by a bolt of lightning and thunder
that in terror he shouted:

“Help, dear Anne, I will become a monk!”

He adds, “Afterwards I regretted my vow.

My friends tried to persuade me
against entering the monastery.

My father was very angry about my vow.

I, however, was determined to go through with it.

In tears they led me away.”

At the young age of 22

Luther had come face to face

with the realization of his mortality.

The *Groan* of anxiety about death
started his long search for a God of *Grace*.

Luther says: “It never occurred to me
to leave the monastery.

I had died completely to the world until God’s proper time.

And Junker Tetzl forced me to leave it.”

At age 22 Luther had become an Augustinian monk.

During the next seven years he became

also a priest, a preacher and a professor.

At the young age of 29 he became a Doctor of Theology.

Now Tetzel enters the picture.

Tetzel was selling indulgences.

Tetzel would stand behind the altar rail while people lined up to buy certificates which would rescue their loved ones out of Purgatory and Hell into Heaven.

Kings had to pay 335.00

Counts 134.00

Business Men 80.40

Guild Members 13.40

The Poor 6.70

The wealthy had to pay four times the top price.

To criticize the sale of these indulgences,

Luther nailed 95 statements

on the door of Wittenberg's Castle church.

If someone nailed anything to your church door he or she would be hauled into court.

But in Luther's days

it was a common way to protest.

In those theses Luther inquired:

"Why did the Pope not deliver poor souls from purgatory for the sake of holy love?

Why did the penitent have to pay money before they were forgiven?"

Luther nailed those 95 theses to that door

because he was a pastor who cared for his people.

His people were groaning for God's forgiveness.

His people were groaning for a gracious God.

His people were groaning to fill the treasury of indulgences.

But he wanted them to have free access

to the treasury of God's Wonderful *Grace!*

Luther wanted them to move from *groans to grace.*

It's a miracle that Luther survived.

His attack on the sale of indulgences was an attack on big business!

It caused an economic scare.

It caused a setback in business, banking, politics and the church.

Some predicted from their pulpits throughout Saxony
that within a month at most
Luther would be burned at the stake as a heretic.

On his long journey on foot to Augsburg
he more than once said to himself
"Now you must die."
A friend said to him
"They will burn you at Augsburg."
But Luther said:
"Let the Lord's will be done.
Even at Augsburg, yea in the midst of His enemies
Jesus Christ rules.
Let Christ live, let Martin die."

Luther had good reason to feel
that his days were numbered.

After all, had they not burned John Huss at the stake?
The *Groan* of the threat of burning at the stake
was only too real for Luther.

But Luther's bottom line was: We live by *Grace*.

But it had not always been "Grace" for Martin.
As a young monk he used to cry out,
"My sins, Oh my sins!"

His father, mother and teachers,
like most parents and teachers those days,
were strict and sometimes severe.

He says: "My father once whipped me
so that I ran away and felt angry toward him."
"My mother caned me until the blood came
for stealing a nut."
"I was caned in Latin school for speaking German."
Of course his father could be jovial.
And his mother sang to the children.
But parents and teachers
dealing with this strong-willed, sensitive child
helped to make his conscience sharp.

He saw God as an angry God
as a punishing God.

The stained glass window in his home church
pictured Christ as a frowning Judge.

At St. Peter's church in Rome
he went up the 28 steps on his hands and knees
kissing each step to win God's favour
for his parents and for himself.

He says: "I was a monk for 20 years
and so plagued myself with
prayers, fastings, waking and freezing
that I almost died of cold."

He says: "I was often frightened by the name of Christ
when I looked upon Him and the Cross.
He seemed to me like a flash of lightning.
When his name was mentioned
I would rather have heard the devil mentioned,
for I believed that I must do good works
to make Christ gracious to me through them.
I believed Christ to be a stern and terrible
judge."

He saw God as an angry Judge sitting on a rainbow.
He lamented: "Oh when will I become pious enough
and do enough to obtain a gracious God!"

Then one day his thoughts focused on Romans 1:17,
"The righteousness of God is revealed through faith."
The righteousness of God was repulsive to Luther.
The righteousness of God meant punishing the sinner.
But after a long struggle, he suddenly saw:
The righteousness of God does not mean *punishing*
the sinner.
The righteousness of God means *forgiving* the sinner.
The righteous shall live by faith means:
The righteous are the Forgiven.
Forgiven because God forgives.

Luther says: "It was as if the very gates of paradise
opened up for me."

Suddenly the frowning Christ became a smiling Christ
and the gruesome God became a gracious God.

With *groans* too deep for words
Luther discovers the *Grace* of God,
Through our Lord Jesus Christ!
From Groans to Grace!

St. Paul says:

We ourselves groan inwardly.

Luther's groan was "My sins, Oh my sins".

The groan of sin and guilt.

The groan of searching for forgiveness.

Surely this is still the groan of many today.

The groan of guilt and shame.

But I must admit that these days,

I do not hear many parishioners, pastors, professors
or seminarians groaning:

"My sins, Oh my sins"!

Karl Meninger wrote a book asking:

Whatever Happened to Sin?

I suspect that in our time
our sense of unworthiness gets expressed
less in terms of sin and guilt
and more in terms of:

low self-esteem;

identity crisis;

I'm no good;

nobody cares about me;

nobody appreciates me.

Today's monstrous and massive changes;
so unpredictable and uncontrollable,
threaten our sense of worth as persons.

A change in the world market can turn
a community into a ghost town
a business into a bankruptcy

a factory into a morgue
a farm into a poorhouse
a church into a haunted house
almost overnight.

Changes in world markets

world politics
multinational corporations
Arab oil prices

Changes in big business

big inflation
big interest rates
big competition

can cost me my savings

my job
my business
my home
my future

And often I as an individual alone
cannot do a thing about it.

All this can make me feel like:

a drop in the bucket
a pebble on the beach
a tiny cog in a big machine
or just an unemployment
insurance number.

Young people wonder:

After all these years at school
will there be a job for me?

The middle-aged wonder:

How long can I hang on
to my job, my business, my home?

The aged wonder:

Does anyone really care
whether I'm dead or alive?

No wonder we lose our sense of worth as persons.

Charlie Brown is a comic strip,
now celebrating its 40th anniversary,
written by a Lutheran called Schulz.

In one of his comic strips

Charlie Brown complains to Linus
about his disappointing love life.

Charlie says to his friend Linus:

"I can't talk to that little red haired girl
because she's something and I'm nothing.

If she were something and I were something
Then I could talk to her.

Or if she were nothing and I were something
Then I could talk to her.

But she's something and I'm nothing
so I can't talk to her."

In pure amazement Linus replies:

"For a nothing Charlie Brown,
you're really something!"¹

How often we feel,
or we're made to feel,
or we make ourselves feel
like a nothing!

The great preacher Edmund Steimle
told the story of a little girl
who played the piano before the great Paderewski.
She played well until she came to a final arpeggio,
when she missed her aim
and made the piano sound
as if it had been wired with bedsprings.
Whereupon the great Paderewski
bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

Think of the difference Paderewski's kiss
made to that little girl.

Had he not given her the kiss
she would have walked out with her head *bent low*.
Because he gave her his kiss
she could walk out with her held *held high!*

Not because of her brilliant playing
but because of his kiss.

In holy baptism

God has bent down and kissed you and me on the forehead.

Luther says:

“This blessed sacrament of Baptism helped me
because in it God allies Himself with me
and becomes one with me
in a *gracious* covenant of comfort.”

Sealed in my baptism is

God’s acceptance of the unacceptable me.

Furthermore, sealed in my Baptism
is my God-given identity!

my identity as a son or daughter of God!

my identity as a brother or sister of Jesus Christ!

my identity as a person of worth in His eyes!

I need no longer walk with my head hung low;
I can walk now with my head held high.

From Groans to Grace!

Some evangelistic preachers would tell you

from now on under Grace it will be all sunshine and roses—
without a cloud in the sky anymore.

So simple, so easy to be a Christian.

But St. Paul says:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning;
and not only the creation but we ourselves
groan inwardly as we wait.”

“But,” adds Paul, “God’s Spirit intercedes for us
with sighs too deep for words!”

To live by Grace is no escape from groans.

But to live by Grace

is to have God’s own Spirit groan on our behalf
with groans too deep for words!

When God groans on my behalf:

“He allies Himself with me.

“He becomes one with me,
in His gracious covenant of comfort.”

Furthermore we not only live by GRACE
we also LIVE by Grace.

Have we Lutherans
Have we Grace Christians
made enough of our *Living*
for one another
and for others?

Paul Holmer a Lutheran and Professor at Yale University
said at a conference some years ago:

“We Lutherans should stop condemning good works,
because there aren’t enough good works left in the
Lutheran church to condemn.”

He was being facetious.

But he made a point.

If we live by *GRACE*,
We will *LIVE* by grace.

We will *share and spread* this grace
with the 20 million refugees in this world,
not only through World Hunger and Lutheran World Relief,
not only through “band aid” help,
but also through helping improve their style
and standard of living,
helping improve their quantity
and quality of life
helping the hungry, thirsty, bleeding,
and crying.

We will share and spread this grace:
by proclaiming to every people, tongue and nation,
that God in whom they live and move
is love.

We will tell how he stooped to save his lost creation,
and died on earth that
we might live above.

We will publish glad tidings, tidings of peace,
tidings of Jesus, redemption and release!

Lutherans with Luther
not only live by *GRACE*,
but also *LIVE* by *GRACE*.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith
and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God”!

Note

- ¹ Robert L. Short, *The Gospel According To Peanuts* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 100.