

October 30/31/November 1, 2021 -- Festival of Reformation
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, New Ulm, MN
Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Can We Be Proud to Be Lutherans?

God's Word Says: Absolutely when we:

1. Stand up for the Bible
2. Stand on the certainty of heaven

Sermon Text: John 8: 31-36

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. **32** Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." **33** They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" **34** Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. **35** Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. **36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In the name of the Triune God, dear brothers and sisters of the Lutheran Reformation,

When was the last time you attended a pep rally? Maybe you attended one as a teen or with a teen. I remember my high school pep rallies back in the day when I was a student at *Michigan Lutheran Seminary* in Saginaw, Michigan. I still remember those Friday afternoons, with the gym jumping with excitement. The pep band playing catchy tunes and the captain of the team inspired us. Talk about glory days! At the time, those pep rallies seemed to change my world. I was so proud to wear our school colors: red & white (similar to our liturgical colors of Reformation). I was proud to be known as a *Michigan Lutheran Seminary Cardinal*, still am. Years later, as I look back, pep rallies and football games were fun, and they make for some good memories when I get together with my high school friends. But, those pep rallies didn't really have an impact on who I'd marry or where I'd live. Thinking back, did your high school pep rally make a big change in your life?

As you consider that question, think of where we are right now! In a very real sense, we're at a spiritual pep rally today at *St. Paul's Lutheran Church*. Now I'm not going to just give you a J, an E, an S, a U, and a S and ask you what that spells. As Lutheran Christians, we are reminded that we have good reason to be proud on this special day. It's the festival of the Lutheran Reformation. It's the day we celebrate an obscure monk named Martin Luther nailing those 95 theses or reasons why the selling of indulgences was wrong to the church door in Germany on October 31, 1517. Let's brush up on some church history from 1517. The sale of indulgences was a false church practice where pieces of paper were actually sold for the forgiveness of sins – call it forgiveness for sale. That event touched off the Lutheran reformation that changed our world. A Lutheran reformation is simply a return to the truth of God's Word in the Christian church. My friends, now isn't the time for having a denominational pep rally: sis-boom-ba: "Lutherans are right and everybody else is wrong." Lutherans don't claim to have the Bible copyrighted for our own exclusive use. And thank God (I mean that: "Thank God") Lutherans also don't claim we are the only ones who are going to heaven. The Bible clearly teaches that any sinner who believes that Jesus died for our sins will go to heaven (Mark 16:16). But, it is time for Lutherans across the globe to thank God for teaching us the truths of the Bible, which as 2 Timothy says: **are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus**. At this worship service, I pray the Holy Spirit will inspire you, to believe that, with Jesus by your side, you will

never lose eternally. I also pray that God will change your doubts, worries, and fears, to Christian faith, hope, and love. That's all part of being Lutheran.

If you are a member of St. Paul's, did you ever wonder why you're called "Lutheran?" If you are a guest today, did you ever wonder what this WELS church stands for? I suppose, what I'm really asking is: **Can We Be Proud to Be Lutherans?** Today, on the basis of John, chapter 8, God says Absolutely. We can have this humble pride and stand where Luther stood only when we stand up for the Bible and when we stand on the certainty of heaven.

As a pastor, I've spent many years talking with folks who aren't WELS inviting them to attend worship with us. Really, the main question that's in the back of people's minds is this: "why do I need to attend a Lutheran church?" I can understand that. Many have bought into that false notion that just because a church has a steeple that points to heaven, that must be a good church. I wish that were true. Sadly, not all churches teach the same, even some Lutheran churches. How do we know what makes a good church to attend and join? A good church isn't just one that's close by, has friendly members with friendly pastors, has a school, or maybe you were baptized there. Listen to the opening words of Jesus in John, chapter 8. He tells us how to separate a good church from a bad one. Our Savior said: ***If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*** Here, Jesus gives the litmus test on what makes a good church. He says: ***if you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples.*** A good church in Jesus' eyes, simply holds or literally "anchors" itself to His teachings. Once anchored to the Bible, we will find safety and security that we are truly the disciples or followers of Jesus. You probably know that a boat without an anchor will drift dangerously out to sea. If a church lets go of its anchor on the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, that church will instantly lose its reason for existing. The old adage is true. Unless a church stands for something, it will fall for anything. You know, Satan, that evil-foe who's constantly on the prowl, always tries to get a church to change it's Biblical stand with lies like: abortion-for-convenience, no-fault divorces, or same sex marriage, just to name a few. When you think about it, in 6000 years, God's teachings haven't changed. For God has already told us: *I the LORD don't change (Malachi 3:6)*. If God doesn't change His teachings, what gives *St. Paul's* or any other church the right to change our teachings? The only way that we'll know God's truth, for us and for families of future generations, is to hold tightly to the Bible as inspired and without any errors. After all, didn't God command in Deuteronomy 4:2: ***Don't add to my Word and do not subtract from it?*** As Lutheran Christians, we know that God in love gave us His Word to save us by pointing us to Jesus as our only Savior. He gave us His Word to protect us by knowing right from wrong. He gave His Word to guide us how to have Godly life now with true peace and joy, and a future to look forward to in heaven. Jesus said his Word does something special. He says: ***32Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*** Jesus says here that His timeless truths set us free. They set us free from ignorance of God's will for our lives, useless superstitions that we'd believe if we didn't know any better, and the damning guilt of our sins. That's truly what gives us reason to cheer and praise God today.

Have you ever been uncomfortable identifying yourself as a member of the WELS, which is a 4-letter acronym for *Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*? Has someone, maybe it was even a close friend or family member that labeled the WELS or *St. Paul's*

as too strict or narrow-minded? I've heard that judgment too. After praying to God for kindness and wisdom, I try to calmly ask: "specifically how is my church so strict or narrow-minded?" Usually, people can't give a very clear answer. They can only give a misguided comment. Do we need to be embarrassed to be called "Lutherans?" Of course not! Confessing Lutherans stand for the entire Bible. A friend of mine named Ann explained it this way: "On Judgement Day, as a Lutheran, I'd rather have God ask me why I followed His word so closely than why I didn't." Instead of being embarrassed for being Lutheran, let's praise God for giving us His Word as it's taught here in its truth and purity. Let's continue to protect His Word from the poison of false teaching. And instead of developing a "moat-mentality," you know, raise the drawbridge of the church and let's not go anywhere, let's speak God's truth in love to others as we invite our friends and family to worship Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world at St. Paul's this week. Then, **We Can Be Proud to Be Lutherans**. We can be proud only if we truly hold to all of Jesus' teachings and stand up for the Bible.

I'd like to take a quick poll. What Bible teaching do most people think of when they hear: WELS or *St. Paul's Lutheran*? What would you say? Many might mention: the teaching of close Communion, the role of man and woman, or the definition of marriage. Most will try to talk about what WELS or *St. Paul's* is against and most of them are truly misinformed. But, in the interests of keeping this sermon less than 20 minutes, let's talk about what we are for. And Martin Luther hailed the greatest teaching of the Bible, the teaching where the church really stands or falls is defined as the second reason why **We Can Be Proud to Be Lutherans**, and that's because we stand on the certainty of heaven. We stand on a fancy Bible teaching called "Justification by Faith." That's simply the Bible's teaching that explains how we sinners are right with God, right now, and that we know for a fact we're going to heaven. Many denominations don't give their members this certainty.

Certainty is one commodity that's hard to come by. For example: are you certain of the weather tomorrow and would you stake your soul on it? Are your favorite sports' team will win their next game and would you bet your soul? More importantly, do you know for certain you are going to heaven? That last question bothered a catholic monk named Martin Luther in the early 1500's. Martin wasn't certain he was going to heaven and that caused him a lot of angst and worry. He knew Jesus' words to be true: *everyone who sins is a slave to sin*. Martin felt the hellish slavery of sin in his life. He felt that he could never earn heaven by his good deeds. You know, Martin was right. Instead of trying to earn heaven by good deeds, all Martin needed to do was remember the final words of Jesus in our sermon reading: ***if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed***. Jesus offered absolute freedom from sin, death, and hell by grace alone, through faith alone, and because Scripture alone promises is. That's what Luther wanted most. And that's what God wants to give us most in a teaching called: Justification by faith. Here's the teaching of Justification by faith short and sweet. From the highest court in heaven, and in the most important court decision in history, God justified the world. That means He declared sinners innocent or "not guilty" of our sins by reason of Jesus Christ. We're declared innocent because Jesus paid the fine for our sins with His blood sacrificed on the cross in our place. Now, the Bible doesn't say in Mark 16:16: *Whoever believes and is baptized MIGHT be saved, HOPES to be saved, or IF YOUR POWERBALL NUMBERS COME UP, you're lucky enough to be saved*. Mark 16:16 reads: *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*. That's certainty we can take as Lutheran Christians in life and to our death-

bed And that certainty changes our perspective right now. The certainty of heaven doesn't mean every problem will disappear. But for the Christian, we now can view our problems as temporary, and as manageable with Jesus. Because the best is yet to come: heaven, guaranteed.

So to wrap this sermon up, what makes WELS different from the rest of the religious world? A short time ago, a friend emailed me a list that made me smile: "You know you're a Lutheran when ... you have an uncontrollable urge to sit in the back of church." You know you're a Lutheran when ... you sing "Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus" sitting down. There's probably some truth to those statements and they might make you smile. But, most importantly what should really bring a smile to our faces as we ask one final time: **Can We Be Proud to Be Lutherans?** Yes, when we stand up for the Bible and when we stand on the certainty of heaven. May God bless us all with this humble pride. Amen. Please stand.