Well today is Reformation Sunday, and it’s a big day for the Lutheran church, as we yearly celebrate the Lutheran Reformation and the “rediscovery of the Gospel”. Sometimes reformation Sunday leaves Lutherans feeling superior, especially to Catholicism. I was raised in a Lutheran church that had much anti-Catholic rhetoric and this is a very unfortunate part of our Lutheran history. The Reformation indeed granted many freedom from the authority of the church to be sure. But the Reformation had many dark consequences, the most obvious being that once the church divided, it kept dividing. An event that was meant to unify us and bring us together became the start of endless division and wrangling.

And so I would like to address this aspect of our Lutheran tradition on this Reformation Sunday. Because at it’s core the freedom of the Gospel is meant to overcome division and hostility, not create it. We live in a world deeply divided over many issues, and this division is just growing more deeper all the time. But the power of God or the work of God’s Spirit in our world today is meant to bring healing to these divisions. God’s Spirit is at work today breaking down walls, not creating them. Ephesians 2:14. For he (Jesus) is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us”. So let’s take a look at how this works today from the point of view of good old fashioned Lutheranism.

I’d like to end up in our second lesson today from the book of Romans. But before we get there Iet’s take a look at a section of Romans from Chapter 1. Because in this section Paul will develop his concept of the sin that leads to all of this strife and division among us. If you want to heal, you have to go to wound, and so Paul begins his argument of the book of Romans with his understanding of sin. I’ll put this up on the screen and try to go slowly so you can follow his argument. In order to heal hostility and division, you have to understand what is creating it. So that’s how we begin. Try to follow along because I’m going to ask you a question at the end.

 Ok, Romans 1:18 and following. Paul begins by talking about “them”. This is critical for you to understand the argument. Notice how he uses them and they. Here we go. So let’s hear about their sin. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. End of Chapter 1.

Now here is where you come in. Chapter 2 starts with these words. Therefore you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. What do you think will come next? Paul has been talking about bad they are. Now he turns to you. Therefore you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. How would you fill in the blank?

Well, I’ll just speak for myself. Inevitably I create a division. I try to separate myself from them. Those people are really wicked. Therefore what? I shouldn’t be like that. I shouldn’t be like them. Don’t be like that. Isn’t something like that, what comes naturally? But here is problem. That’s division isn’t it? And that’s how division usually begins isn’t it? By creating a “them” who are bad, and messed. You know, those people.

And that’s why how Paul fills in the blank is so surprising. There is no way that anyone who hasn’t read this would come up with Paul does next. So I’ll put up the screen so you can see it. Chapter 1. Those people are bad. Chapter 2: Therefore, you what? Therefore **you** have no excuse. What? Wait a minute. I thought we were just talking about them. That they had no excuse. How can it be, therefore that I have no excuse? What did I do? What did we do? Doesn’t make sense. They have no excuse, therefore I have no excuse? What’s that? Well, Paul explains. You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

So Chapter 1 is like a set up. It’s like Paul instinctively knows that as we read Chapter One, we’re going start creating a division in our minds. We shouldn’t be like “them”. Create a division. But Paul’s message is just the opposite. You are exactly like them, he says, because you think like that. Not only is his audience doing a lot of same things. But these are people who like to set themselves up as judge and jury over “them” as well. So we’re all in the same messed up boat here. And I’m sure you know that boat very well. The boat that is filled with “those” messed up people and “those” who sit in judgement of them. It’s every day isn’t it? All the time. I just can’t believe how messed up they are. As if I’m not. That’s where Paul takes us. There is no division at all now. We’re all without excuse, not just “them”.

But here is where the Lutheran world view shines the brightest. Because this reality, that we are all without excuse, could make us despair. This realization might cause us to feel ashamed, or like not much could happen. Wow, what a downer. All my life I’ve been trying not to be like “them”. It’s hard to discover that I am. This might be a very tough place to be, and it could make me bitter and angry.

But think about it for a minute. For what seems like such bad news, can actually be very, very, very Good News. Because if we’re all in the same boat, all without excuse, then there is no division is there? Wow, we’re all the same. We’re all in need of the same thing, no matter who we are. We’re all in need of Grace. And here is where our tradition shines and stands out. For the greatest gifts we have to offer one another in the Lutheran tradition are not our virtues, or our strengths. The greatest gift I have to offer you today, is that I’m in the boat too. I stand in need of Grace and Mercy and Compassion and Understanding just as much as you do. The fact that we are all in the same boat, marked “messed up” is transformed by the reality of God into light. That’s the Good News. That’s the truth that sets us free. I need a lot of Grace. Well, welcome to the kingdom. That’s what it’s about. That’s the power of God that begins to overcome hostility and division. You can look at “those” people and say. Hmm. We’re exactly the same. Without excuse and needing a little Grace. That’s where the healing begins. On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.

I’ll just finish with a few verses that Lutherans have prized from our second lesson today. Beginning at verse 21. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifce of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded? By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed the the law. We’re all in the same boat. Saved by Grace. Welcome to the Reformation. Amen.