

***Grace and Ernest Go to Church:  
Lenten Dialogues on Reformation Themes***

These dialogues are intended for use within a service of Evening Prayer during Lent 2017, perhaps as part of a midweek gathering for a meal and worship. The dialogues can also be used in a Sunday worship service, a retreat setting, an adult forum studying Reformation themes, or for personal study and meditation. For each week we have provided a quotation from the writings of Martin Luther, a suggested scripture passage, the dialogue, several discussion questions and brief prayer petitions.

The setting for the dialogues may be quite simple — two chairs in front of the congregation, perhaps with a few props suggested by the specific skit. Such simple staging makes these dialogues usable in many contexts, but more elaborate use of props and stage settings may be helpful in reinforcing the message of each dialogue. The conversation in these dialogues is intended to be realistic and to express the good-natured banter that might occur between friends or family members. Dialogue participants should be encouraged to emphasize these moments of humor in the script.

## Week One

### *Reformation Theme: Justification by Grace Through Faith*



**“Here is the first and chief article:  
That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for  
our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom.4:25); and  
he alone is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”  
(John1:29); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is.  
53:6); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified  
without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ  
Jesus . . . by his blood.” (Rom 3:23-25).  
Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or  
grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it clear and certain  
this faith alone justifies us.” *Smalcald Articles II:1-4***

#### **SCRIPTURE**

But now, irrespective of 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 sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his 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. (Rom. 3:21-26)

#### **DIALOGUE**

Narrator: Ernest and Grace have recently joined a Lutheran church, and they have been having regular conversations about what they learned in their new members class and what they observe at their new church.

Ernest: You know, Grace, this Lenten season we're in reminds me of Christmas.

Grace: That's a strange thought, Ernest. Christmas is long gone, and we're heading for Easter. What about Lent reminds you of Christmas?

Ernest: Actually it reminds me of Santa Claus.

Grace: Why do you say that?

Ernest: I'm reminded of Santa Claus because of all the emphasis on repentance in Lent.

Grace: What does repentance have to do with Santa Claus?

Ernest: You know that song about Santa Claus coming to town—the one that goes:

*He sees you when you're sleeping,  
He knows when you're awake.  
He knows when you've been bad or good,  
So be good for goodness sake!*

Talk about repentance makes me think God is like Santa Claus, watching over us to see if we do good and then rewarding or punishing us depending on how well we've kept God's commandments.

Grace: Do you really think that God is like Santa Claus?

Ernest: Don't you think so?

Grace: NO! All the emphasis on Santa Claus during Christmas time tempts us to compare God with Santa Claus, but the Bible paints a very different picture of God.

Ernest: How is God different? I often feel as if God is watching every move I make.

Grace: I don't question God's knowledge, but remember what we learned about God in our new members class. God is not angry and upset with us and eagerly awaiting to punish us. No, God is gracious and forgiving and wants to surround us with love in spite of all our failures to follow God's way.

Ernest: How do you know that?

Grace: Mostly because of what we really celebrate at Christmas.

Ernest: You mean the birth of Jesus?

Grace: Yes! Jesus came to show us how much God loves us—loves us so much that God chose to become one of us so that we can know God's love firsthand.

Ernest: And God loves us so much that Jesus died for us on the cross, which is what we think about during Lent.

Grace: True enough, but don't forget about Easter.

Ernest: I won't, but isn't Jesus' dying for us a reason for us to feel guilty?

Grace: I don't think so. It's more a reason for us to be amazed at God's grace that doesn't quit just because powerful people in the world oppose what the love of God does.

Ernest: "Amazing Grace." That sounds familiar.

Grace: OK, I borrowed a phrase from a popular hymn, but that's what God's love is, "amazing."

Ernest: I'm still not convinced that God isn't like Santa Claus. Aren't we supposed to be good so that we can be blessed by God?

Grace: No, it works the other way around. Because we're so amazed at how much God loves us, then we do the good things God wants us to do. Or, as they said in class, "It's not that you *got to* do good works, it's that you *get to*."

Ernest: So doing good things is something we do freely because we're grateful for God's love?

Grace: You've got it! I think of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Ernest: OK, but does that support your point? Didn't the son that left home and wasted all his inheritance return home, repent to his father, and earn forgiveness from his father?

Grace: Not if you read the parable carefully. When the father saw his lost son returning home, he ran out and embraced him before the son could even get his words of repentance out. Forgiveness came first and then the son's repentant actions.

Ernest: Well, if we're not supposed to repent in order to get God to forgive us, what's the point of a whole season of the church year devoted to repentance?

Grace: Perhaps the whole point of a season devoted to repentance is to help us get the spirit of repentance right. We don't repent to get God to forgive us; we repent to remind us of God's gracious forgiveness and to be encouraged to follow God's ways in response.

Ernest: Do you like to watch "*The Sound of Music*"?

Grace: Of course, that's one of my favorite movies. Why in the world do you ask that now?

Ernest: Because I don't think we should watch it any more.

Grace: Why do you say that?

Ernest: Because the music might lead us astray.

Grace: Why do you say something so crazy? How can such beautiful songs as "*Climb Every Mountain*" or "*The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Music*" lead us astray?

Ernest: Maybe not those songs, but what about the song that Maria sings to Captain von Trapp?

She's wondering why he could love her and then she sings,

*"Nothing comes from nothing*

*Nothing ever could*

*So somewhere in my youth or childhood*

*I must have done something good."*

She seems to believe that you earn something good by doing good. Good things don't happen by grace.

Grace: You're right. That song doesn't square with what I've been saying. Maria's song suggests an exchange between God and us—we do something good and then God blesses us. What we're remembering during Lent is a different exchange: God invites us into a trusting relationship with Jesus where Jesus offers us the love he came to show and takes from us our sins and failure to love like God does. When we come to God in faith we receive that love as a free gift.

Ernest: So we can enjoy "*The Sound of Music*" but we should leave behind the Santa Claus version of God.

Grace: Right—we get to do good because God's goodness touches us first. (*Turning to congregation*) So how are you rejoicing in God's amazing grace and responding to God's love?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a limit to God's grace? Why are we so tempted to limit it?
2. What can your congregation do to show more fully God's 'amazing grace' to visitors? To people in need? To children? To mentally or physically challenged folks?
3. Discuss Maria's song: "Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good." Are Grace and Ernest being too critical, or are they on to something?

## PRAYERS

Loving God, you give us the gift of the Church as a sign of your gracious welcome. Enable us to share that welcome, making this congregation a place of safety, warmth and shelter for all who enter here. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Forgiving God, in baptism you poured out your spirit of forgiveness even before we were able to seek it. Be with those who execute the law, those who have broken it, and those who have suffered as a result of sin. May our justice be tempered by mercy and our judgments by wisdom. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Generous God, your blessings are endless and your gifts beyond our counting. Give us an awareness that all that we have comes from you, and that none of it is of our doing. Make us humble in our possessions and unstinting in our giving. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Tender God, you know our pains and share our sorrows. Be with those who suffer this night, especially . . . . Give them the assurance of your presence, bringing your healing through all who provide care. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

For all these things, and all that you know that we need even when we cannot ask, we pray, O Lord, trusting always in your mercy. **Amen.**

## Week Two

### *Reformation Theme: The Authority of Scripture*



All genuinely sacred books are unanimous here, and all preach Christ emphatically. The true touchstone for testing every book is to discover whether it emphasizes the prominence of Christ or not. All Scripture sets forth Christ, Romans 3 and Paul will know nothing but Christ, I Corinthians 2. What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, not even if taught by Peter or Paul. On the other hand, what does preach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod does it. *Preface to James and Jude, LW 35:396*

#### **SCRIPTURE**

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:14-17)

#### **DIALOGUE**

Narrator: Ernest and Grace have recently joined a Lutheran church, and they continue to have conversations about what they learned in their new members class and what they observe at their new church.

Ernest: What did you think about the baptism we had in church this morning?

Grace: I enjoy baptisms, Ernest. They are signs that our congregation is growing, and it's great to witness another person being declared a child of God forever. Besides if it's an infant baptism, it's fun to see how the babies react. I thought it was ironic how the baby cried right when the pastor talked about having joy in God's presence. But why do you ask?

Ernest: I noticed something else. Did you hear how the pastor asked the parents to place the Holy Scriptures in the child's hands?

Grace: I wasn't paying that close attention, but I do recall something like that.

Ernest: Well, isn't that an unrealistic expectation?

Grace: Why do you say that? I think our congregation gives out Bibles to our Sunday School children.

Ernest: That's nice, but why make the parents promise to do that? The Bible is difficult to understand for adults. Why make the parents promise to give Bibles to young children?

And when it's a baby being baptized, why make them promise it now? The child won't be able to read for a number of years.

Grace: You surely are full of questions! But it's not quite as difficult as you seem to think. There are Bible story books for children, and some translations of the Bible are geared for younger readers.

Ernest: Maybe so, but even children's Bible story books and simplified versions can't eliminate difficult sections of the Bible. I remember giving up on reading the Bible when I ran up against those genealogies—first in Genesis in the Old Testament and then even in the New Testament in Matthew.

Grace: You should have just skipped over those genealogies!

Ernest: But how was I to know that? I thought all the Bible was important.

Grace: Important but not necessarily helpful to everyone all the time. You are right that there are difficult passages in the Bible, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't read and study it.

Ernest: Why doesn't it mean that? Isn't it simpler and less confusing to let our pastor tell us what the Bible means?

Grace: But that would be missing one of the main points of the Lutheran reformation!

Ernest: It would? Why do you say that?

Grace: Remember how our teacher said that for Lutherans what we believe and teach is based on the Bible. Apparently one of the mottoes for Luther was "Scripture Alone!" He emphasized that we should follow what the Bible tells us, not necessarily what church leaders say.

Ernest: I suppose that's one reason why Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people.

Grace: That's right.

Ernest: OK, but that doesn't change the fact that the Bible is difficult to understand. Don't we need to depend on pastors and teachers to explain to us what the Bible means?

Grace: Well, we do hope we can trust our leaders to teach and preach on the basis of the Scriptures, but that is why it is important for us to study the Bible so that we can compare what they say with the Bible ourselves.

Ernest: Are you telling me that I should be coming to that Bible study group with you?

Grace: That would be a good idea!

Ernest: Maybe I'll think about it, but there are so many ways that people interpret the Bible. How can we know which is the right interpretation so that we can base our faith on it?

Grace: What do you mean?

Ernest: For example, consider the first couple chapters of Genesis. Some Christians interpret them to mean that the universe was created in six days. Others say that Genesis is like a parable and the creation account is meant to give us an important message about who God is. Or consider the Book of Revelation. Some Christians say it is a literal picture of how the world is supposed to end; others say it's a symbolic book using language about the end of the world to depict the conflict between people of faith and the powers of this world. So how can the Scriptures be the authority for what we believe when there is so much disagreement about what the Scriptures actually mean?

Grace: Wow! That's pretty heavy! Maybe we should ask pastor about this.

Ernest: But I thought you said that the Scriptures are our authority, not some church leader.

Grace: Touché! You've got me there. I remember something from our class that might help.

Our teacher said something about how we believe the Scriptures are the word of God, but that ultimately Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the one who revealed to us what God is all about. The Scriptures are the word of God because they show us what God is all about and especially because they tell us who Jesus is and how he is the Word of God. "Scripture Alone" doesn't mean that the Bible is the authority for us just because it is the Bible. It is the authority for us because it points to Jesus.

Ernest: I remember the teacher saying something weird about Luther seeing Jesus behind every rock and bush in the Old Testament. I guess that's what Luther meant—the central message of the Scriptures is that God loves and forgives us and sent Jesus to demonstrate that to us.

Grace: Yes, and the Scriptures are authority for us to make sure we don't lose sight of that central message. We can disagree about how to interpret some portions of the Bible, but our interpretations are headed in the wrong direction if they conflict with that message of God's love in Christ.

Ernest: I'm reminded of a song I learned in Sunday School a long time ago. Maybe it's too simple for us now, but it makes the same point.

Grace: What song is that?

Ernest: It begins, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Maybe it's OK to give Bibles to children after all, as long as we teach them that song.

Grace: Good point, Ernest. Now will you come to Bible class with me next time? (*Turning to congregation*) So how are you growing in your understanding of the message of the Scriptures?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does your congregation encourage Scripture reading and study? What more could be done for both youth and adults?
2. Are there 'Bible battles' in your congregation? How might literalists and progressives find common ground?
3. Are science and scripture necessarily at odds? Why or why not?

## PRAYERS

Holy God, come to us in this hour, that we may know your power and be filled with your love.

Creator God, you spoke and the world came into being. Give us an awareness of your presence in the world today, and help us to care for all that you have made. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, you are the Living Word, bringing us the promise of new life in you. Speak to us, that we may know and do the Father's will. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Holy Spirit, you call to us and create faith in searching hearts. Open to us the Scriptures, that we may grow in the assurance of God's love. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Lord of all, you reveal yourself to us anew each time we turn to you. Make us your people, speak to us of your love, move in us to make us a blessing to all your children. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

For all these things, and all that you know that we need even when we cannot ask, we pray, O Lord, trusting always in your mercy. **Amen.**

## Week Three

### *Reformation Theme: Priesthood of All Believers*



This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12 (:4-5) and in 1 Peter 2 (:9), ...namely that we are all the body of Christ the Head, and all members of one another. Christ does not have two different bodies, one temporal and the other spiritual. There is but one Head and one body...A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work and office, so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all members of the body serve one another. (I Cor. 12:14-26) *To the Christian Nobility*, LW 44:129

#### **SCRIPTURE**

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

#### **DIALOGUE**

Narrator: Ernest and Grace have recently joined a Lutheran church, and they have been having regular conversations about what they learned in their new members class and what they observe at their new church.

Ernest: Did you read the bulletin from church today?

Grace: Of course, you can't follow the service if you don't read the bulletin.

Ernest: I don't mean the worship part. I mean the part where the leaders of the congregation are listed.

Grace: You mean the section where the pastor and music director are listed?

Ernest: Yes, that's the part I mean. Did you read it?

Grace: I didn't pay that much attention to it. It's the same every week, isn't it?

Ernest: Maybe it is, but there's something about it that I didn't pay much attention to before, and I think we'd better watch out or we might have to do a lot more at church than we bargained for.

Grace: What in the world do you mean, Ernest? You make it sound like there's something scary about our church. What did you see in the bulletin that makes you say that?

Ernest: After the bulletin lists the pastor and the church musician and the other staff people, it says, "The ministers: The people of our congregation."

Grace: What's scary about that?

Ernest: Well, I didn't expect to become a minister by joining our church. I don't mind coming to worship and helping out with some of our church's projects, but I surely have no intention of becoming a minister. If that's what we are now that we're members of our church, they should have warned us about that in our new members class.

Grace: Oh, Ernest, were you asleep during that part of our new members class?

Ernest: I don't think so, Grace. Did they talk about the staff listing in the bulletin during our class?

Grace: No, they didn't talk about the bulletin, but they did talk about Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers.

Ernest: Wait a minute! It's one thing to be called a minister, but it's a different ball game to be called a priest. Now that I'm a member here, do I have to leave my wife and become celibate?

Grace: Ernest, Ernest! Luther was speaking metaphorically. Luther emphasized the importance of baptism and that in baptism we all have been made God's children equally. There aren't different classes of Christians, some more important than others. It's like all of us who are baptized are priests or ministers.

Ernest: You're not helping me here. It doesn't sound like you're talking metaphorically. Am I a priest or not?

Grace: Not literally—unless God has that in store for you. Here's what I mean: "minister" means someone who serves people. When we're baptized we're all called to live like God's children by honoring God and serving others. Some may do that by being a pastor, but there are many ways to serve others.

Ernest: So the people of our congregation are ministers because all of us have a calling to live like God's children and serve others.

Grace: Right.

Ernest: What exactly does that mean for us?

Grace: In our membership class they said that one way of being a minister is to be sure to show God's love in all our relationships.

Ernest: I'm being a minister, then, when I'm loving to my wife and kids?

Grace: Yes, and also when you're loving and caring with the rest of your family or at work or with your friends or with people at church or people our church tries to help. But there's more.

Ernest: More? That sounds like a lot of responsibility.

Grace: Yes, it is, but we also have the opportunity to be ministers in how we use the specific talents and gifts we each have.

Ernest: How does that work? I like sports. How is that something I can minister with?

Grace: Maybe you could coach a children's team. Maybe you could be a "big brother" and teach someone a sport you love.

Ernest: Well, how about you? This applies to you too, doesn't it?

Grace: Of course, and I've been thinking about what this might mean for me. I like to cook and to organize events. Maybe I could help organize a fundraising event for our project to help homeless people or bring food to one of our church dinners.

Ernest: It seems like the opportunities might be endless.

Grace: I think so, but they might also be fun when we think of creative ways to put our talents and interests to work.

Ernest: Fun? Maybe so. You've almost convinced me that being called a minister of our congregation is not so scary.

Grace: I think that's a good thing, but you might not be totally wrong in seeing this role as minister as somewhat scary.

Ernest: Are you going to confuse me now and contradict every thing you've been saying?

Grace: I hope not, but when you follow God's call to love others as one of God's ministers, you don't know where that will lead you and what you will end up doing. You might run into all kinds of challenges and some might be scary.

Ernest: Perhaps scary, but also rewarding to be living as one of God's beloved children. (*Turning to congregation*) So how are you living as one of God's ministers?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the gifts that come with your baptismal 'priesthood'? Are there connected responsibilities that come with them?
2. List ways in which your congregation encourages the priesthood of all people—in worship, ministry and daily life. Are there ways it could grow in understanding or practice?
3. The priesthood of all was closely tied to Luther's understanding of 'vocation,' seeing our daily jobs as much a 'call' from God as the pastor's. Discuss ways in which God is using you and your gifts daily. (Could next "Labor Day" worship celebrate this in some way?)

### PRAYERS

For the Church throughout the world, that it may be a light shining in darkness, leading all peoples to know the love of God, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For all the places in the world that are torn by strife, hatred and violence, that peace may burst forth and send up new growth of forgiveness, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For those who would serve you, that we might recognize our talents, gifts and blessings and find ways to use them to serve our neighbors, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For all who minister in your name, that we might affirm the vocation of every person and grow in our recognition that every call to service comes from you, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For those who wander in darkness, who struggle with illness of body, mind or soul, who feel unloved or unneeded, that they might know that they too are God's people, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For your chosen ones who surround you now in glory, that we may await with eagerness the time when we all shall gather to sing your praises, let us pray.

**Lord, have mercy.**

For all these things, and all that you know that we need even when we cannot ask, we pray, O Lord, trusting always in your mercy. **Amen.**

## Week Four

### *Reformation Theme: The Freedom of the Christian*



Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:367

#### **SCRIPTURE**

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:4-10)

#### **DIALOGUE**

Narrator: Ernest and Grace have recently joined a Lutheran church, and they have been having regular conversations about what they learned in their new members class and what they observe at their new church.

Ernest: Grace, do you ever worry about joining a church that contradicts itself so often?

Grace: No, I don't, Ernest, but I haven't noticed that our church contradicts itself. What are you talking about?

Ernest: I noticed it first when we were talking about how we're all sinners. I can understand that. I have no trouble admitting that I'm a sinner. Yet in almost the next breath we were told that we are all saints. I have more trouble seeing myself as a saint, but suppose that I am a saint, isn't that contradictory? How can we be both saints and sinners at the same time?

Grace: I admit it does sound contradictory, but I think it's just realistic. Actual life can be complex and ambiguous sometimes, and saying that we're saints and sinners captures that ambiguity.

Ernest: Well, I don't like ambiguity. Why can't we just tell it like it is and not be wishy-washy?

Grace: Saying that we're saints and sinners does tell it like it is.

Ernest: How can that be? Aren't we one or the other?

Grace: No, we're both. You agree that we're sinners, right?

Ernest: Yes, I agree—especially you—but I'll admit to it too.

Grace: Thanks for your "compliment"! But we're saints too.

Ernest: How can that be?

Grace: It depends on what we mean by "saint." "Saint" in our sense doesn't mean someone who is holy and sinless; it means someone who is a child of God and has faith in Jesus. It doesn't mean that we are perfect and sinless; it means that we are members of God's family who have been blessed with God's forgiveness.

Ernest: Thanks for the explanation. It seems to make sense, but I want to mull it over some more. But there's more contradiction that I've seen.

Grace: What's that?

Ernest: I remember our class leader saying something about how Martin Luther said we Christians are both free people and servants at the same time. Doesn't that sound contradictory to you?

Grace: It did at first, but then I realized it is a paradox.

Ernest: A pair of what?

Grace: Not a pair of anything, Ernest! A paradox is something that is true even if it holds together two beliefs that seem contradictory on the surface.

Ernest: Like walking seems to take more energy than standing, but standing is more stressful than walking?

Grace: Really? I didn't know that. Yes, a paradox is like that. You can't be both free and a servant at the same time, and yet it is true that a Christian is exactly that.

Ernest: So we Lutherans affirm both ambiguity and paradox.

Grace: Right.

Ernest: OK, but can you explain to me how it is true that a Christian is both free and a servant?

Grace: I'll try. Luther's discovery was that our faith relationship with Jesus frees us from demands that we have to do good deeds to earn God's love. Jesus came to help us see that God's love is a free gift to those who believe in him.

Ernest: All right. A Christian is free because God's love and forgiveness come freely and don't have to be earned.

Grace: Exactly, but—

Ernest: "But"? So there's a catch?

Grace: Not a catch, but the second half of the paradox.

Ernest: Not a contradiction but a paradox.

Grace: That's right, and the second half of the paradox is that the mission of Christians is to respond to this free gift of God's love by loving God and others.

Ernest: Like Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Grace: And like St. Paul said, "Owe no one anything except to love one another."

Ernest: But you said that the second half of the paradox is that we are to be servants. What does that have to do with love?

Grace: Are you serious?

Ernest: Yes, I don't see how loving someone makes me their servant.

Grace: Do you love your wife?

Ernest: Yes, I love her but I'm not her servant.

Grace: Did you promise to love her "in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health"?

Ernest: I don't remember a lot of specifics from our wedding day, but I think I promised that.

Grace: Do you help her when she needs help? Do you get her things she needs?

Ernest: Yes.

Grace: Do you take her to the doctor when she's not feeling well and get medicine for her when she's sick?

Ernest: Yes.

Grace: I could go on, but aren't all those things ways of being like a servant for her?

Ernest: I suppose, but servants are paid to do such things, and I do it for free because of the commitments I've made to my wife.

Grace: That's a good point, but what I'm saying is that in response to God's love for us, Christians freely show love to others in ways that are like being servants.

Ernest: There's that contradiction again: "freely" "being servants."

Grace: Not a contradiction—a paradox! The love that God showed us in Jesus frees us from the burden of needing to find a way to please God and prompts us to bind ourselves to others to love and serve them.

Ernest: Thanks for that explanation. I definitely can see how love is a paradox. When I think of the people I love—family or friends—those loving relationships give me great joy, but they also weigh on me when we face troubles or difficulties together.

Grace: So loving relationships bring you joy, but difficulties you face together load you down with burdens? That's a contradiction, right?

Ernest: No, that's the paradox of love!

Grace: That's not too wishy-washy for you?

Ernest: You've got me, Grace. Considering the fullness of our faith can lead to paradoxes like Luther's, being perfectly free yet completely a servant of all. But I don't think we should advertise it.

Grace: Why not?

Ernest: "Come join the church of ambiguity and paradox" doesn't make a very appealing marketing slogan!

Grace: Perhaps not, but maybe we should try it and see!

Ernest: *(Turning to the congregation)* Do you embrace ambiguity and paradox?

Grace: *(Also turning to the congregation)* And do you embrace the freedom of faith and the servanthood of Christian love?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Folks who want things clear and straightforward (right/wrong, black/white, true/false) are often uncomfortable with the grey areas of paradox and ambiguity. Should Lutherans simplify things to draw them in?
2. How do you see your freedom in Christ relating to your servant ministry to others?
3. Does talk of 'sin' or 'sinner' have a place in today's world? If so, how might it best be used? What are the dangers to avoid?

4. What examples of servanthood are evident in your congregation? Are there some needs not being met?

### **PRAYERS**

Mighty Lord, you call your people together to hear your Word and to be formed into your Body in the world. Be with us now as we bring ourselves to you. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Forgiving God, you know the sinfulness that is rooted in our hearts. In this Lenten season, help us to dig at those roots, that we may become good soil for your love. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Liberating God, you promise us that we do not need to earn your love. We give you thanks that you make us your sons and daughters, even when we are unworthy to be welcomed into your family. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

Lord of all, show us how your gracious love so freely given can grow in us and bless those around us. Lead us on the road of discipleship freely chosen, the path of caring, giving, serving. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

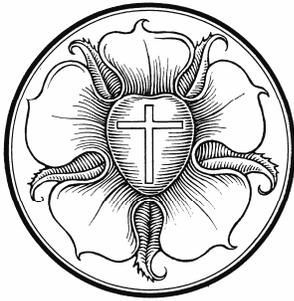
God of the ages, we give you thanks for those who have been models of grace and service. May these saints be for us examples of life in you, ever free and ever bound, rejoicing and serving in your name. Lord, in your mercy...

**Hear our prayer.**

For all these things, and all that you know that we need even when we cannot ask, we pray, O Lord, trusting always in your mercy. **Amen.**

## Week Five

### ***Reformation Theme: The Always-Reforming Church***



**This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed. *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles, LW 32:24***

### **SCRIPTURE**

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:12-18)

### **DIALOGUE**

Narrator: Ernest and Grace have recently joined a Lutheran church, and they are having another conversation about what they learned in their new members class and what they observe at their new church.

Ernest: Did you like history in school, Grace?

Grace: As a matter of fact I did.

Ernest: And do you like to watch the History Channel?

Grace: I do. I especially enjoy programs about the early years of our country. George Washington is a favorite of mine. Why these questions about history?

Ernest: Well, I noticed that you seemed to enjoy the times in our new members class when the teacher talked about Luther and the early years of the Reformation.

Grace: I did find that interesting. Didn't you?

Ernest: A little bit, but I don't think as much as you did.

Grace: Why not?

Ernest: I'm more interested in what's happening now than in the past.

Grace: I can understand that, but the past can be important for the present. I've heard someone say that if you don't learn from history you'll be condemned to repeat it.

Ernest: That might be true, but I'm less interested in the Reformation of five hundred years ago and more in how the church should be reforming itself today.

Grace: That's a good point, Ernest, and I think I remember our teacher saying that one of the emphases of the Lutheran Reformation was that the church should always be reforming itself.

Ernest: I agree with that, but does dwelling on the past help with that?

Grace: It might, but you're right that we have to be careful not to dwell in the past so much that we forget to think about how to reform the church now.

Ernest: How do you think some of the things we learned about the history of our church can help us now?

Grace: I think it's still meaningful to let people know that we're justified by God's grace through faith in Christ.

Ernest: I don't know. Back in Luther's time everyone was afraid of being condemned by God. I don't think people are afraid of God today—if they even believe in God.

Grace: You're right. The world is surely different now than it was 500 years ago. Maybe people aren't that afraid of God's judgment today, but I'm pretty sure that a lot of people think that Christian churches are out to condemn people.

Ernest: And you do hear about some Christians who reinforce that idea. Do you think that our message of being saved by grace through faith can help combat that misperception?

Grace: I do. Perhaps reforming the church now means finding ways to spread the message that God loves sinners and freely offers a loving relationship.

Ernest: Whoa! Don't talk about "sin"! People today don't like it when the church obsesses over sin.

Grace: But how can you see all the violence and terrorism and destruction of people and the environment and not believe that there is sin?

Ernest: That's a good question. But I think we need to be careful not to be caught carping about sin.

Grace: OK, but I think talking about the evil things we see in the world today is not carping about sin; it's just being honest and realistic.

Ernest: Let's just be sure that we emphasize that God's love and forgiveness are gifts, offered freely to all.

Grace: I can agree with that. Is that how you'd reform the Church for today?

Ernest: That's a start. I think it would be good to emphasize the priesthood of all believers.

Grace: You do? I thought that made you nervous because you thought you'd have to become a priest or pastor.

Ernest: It did at first. You helped me to understand it better. As God's children through baptism we have equally important ministry to do whoever we are and whatever we do. I think some people still think that you're not really important in the Church unless you're a full time church worker or serve on lots of church committees.

Grace: What do you think we should do different?

Ernest: I'm not sure exactly, but we should let people know that what they do outside of the church walls is an important part of their faith. I knew a fire fighter who joined a church and told the pastor he thought God had something important for him to do. The pastor suggested he join the property committee. Why not tell him that being a good fire fighter was his important ministry?

Grace: Yes, and I suspect that the Church has been nervous about some kinds of jobs. I know a scientist who told me that she felt that her church was uncomfortable with what she did and never affirmed her commitment to her scientific research, even though her work helped her see how awesome God's creation is.

Ernest: So maybe our reform should emphasize the paradox of our faith.

Grace: I thought you didn't like that either and wanted us to keep quiet about that!

Ernest: Sometimes paradox is a good thing. You can have your cake and eat it too.

Grace: I don't imagine you're talking about our church dinners. What do you mean by emphasizing the paradox of our faith?

Ernest: Well, we said that we are both perfectly free and also servants. I think it would be good to make sure that whatever reforms we suggest emphasize both how free we are because of God's love and forgiveness and how much our faith leads us to serve others because of God's love. We can invite others to know the freedom that comes from God's love and we can also invite them to join us in all the various ways we may try to help others.

Grace: You seem to have lots of good ideas about keeping up the reforming spirit.

Ernest: You're not going to suggest that I join a committee to come up with proposals for reforming our congregation, are you?

Grace: Actually I was. Wouldn't you be good for that with all these ideas you're spinning around?

Ernest: Maybe, but remember my point about how our ministry can be done outside of our congregational activities.

Grace: Yes, I do remember that, but important ministry can also be done through the life of our congregation—or what we do as a congregation can help people do their ministry outside the congregation.

Ernest: Are you saying that I might be the next great reformer?

Grace: I'm not going that far, but I do think you can help keep the reforming spirit going in our congregation.

Ernest: I'll think about what I should do. (*Turning to congregation*) So what are you doing to keep the reforming spirit alive?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The book of Acts, Chapter 2, describes the Holy Spirit as 'violent wind' and 'tongues as of fire.' How might either of those images speak to the idea of on-going reform in the church?
2. One wag declared that a church is not a 'museum for saints,' but rather a 'hospital for sinners.' Does this image reflect your congregation? How might you share that reality beyond your walls?
3. How can we cherish important traditions and still be open to the Spirit? If the idea of change brings ouches to your congregation, what are some ways to ease the pain?

## **PRAYERS**

Eternal God, your Church has been a sign of your presence in the world throughout the ages. Strengthen us to persevere in the face of turmoil and to be faithful in an age of doubt. Lord, in your mercy...

### **Hear our prayer.**

We give you thanks for Martin Luther and those others who preached the Reformation message. May they be models for us of fearless change and constant faith. Lord, in your mercy...

### **Hear our prayer.**

We ask your blessing on the Church today, as it remembers the call to continue to be reformed by your Word. Embolden us to speak your eternal message of love to who those who most need to hear it. Lord, in your mercy...

### **Hear our prayer.**

We raise up before you this congregation. Let those who gather here be renewed in the Reformation message of the truth that frees us to serve. May the spirit of the Reformers blossom here so that our faith may grow and bear fruit for your kingdom. Lord, in your mercy...

### **Hear our prayer.**

For all these things, and all that you know that we need even when we cannot ask, we pray, O Lord, trusting always in your mercy. **Amen.**