

# GOD'S GRACE SETS US FREE

*Sermon on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary  
of the Signing Celebration  
of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification  
between the Lutheran World Federation, the Roman Catholic Church  
and the World Methodist Council*

*ECUMENICAL VESPERS  
Cathedral of Augsburg, Augsburg, Germany  
Saturday, October 31, 2009, 2:00 p.m.*

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*"... for He rescued us from the power of the  
Kingdom of darkness, and brought us over into  
the Kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we  
have redemption and the forgiveness of sins."  
(Col 1:13-14)*

Paul writes to the church in Colossus. His central message is conveyed in a language that conjures images from a historical background quite different from ours today. He recalls indirectly the events of the years 720 BC and 586 BC when many of his forebears were deported to ancient Syria and Babylon. Symbols of national identity such as the monarchy and the priesthood were abolished, and the temple and holy places were destroyed. Thus deep family, religious and national ties were broken. These periods of darkness were marked by a strong sense of humiliation, sadness and helplessness. It seemed to them that God had abandoned them because of their unfaithfulness. God's abandonment precipitated a national crisis. Their eventual release from captivity was seen and understood as divinely initiated.

God, the gracious One who intervenes in human affairs, set them free from slavery and captivity. Freedom is therefore understood as a gift from the gracious God.

Paul writes to the church in Colossus and reminds them that prior to their baptism they had been captives and enslaved to sin; they had lived in the dark shadows of doubt, despair, pain and hatred. Christ as the light of the world kindles his everlasting flame making our hearts and minds hunger and thirst for righteousness. As the light of the world *he* lives and moves in the lives of people individually and in community. He strives with those who strive. Being transferred from the kingdom of darkness to that of His beloved Son means that we are transferred from condemnation to forgiveness. Through Christ our debts have been paid; we are redeemed and are declared just in the eyes of God. Christ has paid the impossible debt on our behalf. We are set free at last. This is a fact. The initiatives to set us free and to transfer us

from the kingdom of despair to that of hope is taken by God based on divine *love* and *grace*, without our input.

We are invited to turn to God and to one another, giving praise to God for what has been accomplished for us, our neighbors and the entire human race. In the kingdom of His beloved Son we find the source of new life in freedom and mutual forgiveness.

As citizens of Christ's kingdom rooted in God's forgiveness we are brought into life in communion with God in Christ and with one another. Walls of separation, isolation and imprisonment are broken down. We are a new community of "the forgiven," hence we are called to live a life of daily repentance and our daily prayer is **"forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of others"**.

When we accept God's forgiveness through faith we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and are moved to be reconciled with one another. Our relationship one to another is changed to such an extent that our actions are of a different quality – Matthew 5:23-24 reads:

*"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave the gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. " (NRSV)*

Therefore it is not sufficient as St Paul said, that "I give away all I have" to the poor and the homeless, or have prophetic powers and knowledge about the gospel in order to teach in tongues of men and angels. The highest point of my discipleship is reached when I, through God's grace, identify with the deepest needs of my fellow human beings; the need to be forgiven and reconciled to one another; to be set free for the sake of the Gospel. Sharing in His mission through the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to overcome the ever-present forces of division in church and in society. It helps us to seek responsible ways of reducing the enemy images that isolate and separate us from the gift of communion with God and with one another.

If indeed we are co-sharers in the forgiveness of God it is only natural that we endeavor in the spirit of reconciliation to overcome the doctrinal anathemas that separate us from the gift of communion.

Yes, the gospel sets us free but it also gives us the energy and spiritual maturity, insights and new theological language required for us to speak to one another in such a way that we can radiate God's forgiveness to one another and to the world. We are gathered here in this beautiful city of Augsburg to advance the historic moment of ten years ago. Seen from the perspective of God's gracious forgiveness the affirmation of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by signature was an attempt to appropriate God's forgiveness into the life of the churches. If God has indeed forgiven us in Christ then the next steps include seeking responsible ways of continuing in ecumenical dialogue to overcoming remaining anathemas.

We have been forgiven by God, let us forgive one another, so that "doing" God's will on earth as it is in heaven, may move us to experience a different quality of relationship within the

Church of Jesus Christ. That the structures of the Church may be renewed so we could witness together to what Christ has achieved for the world.

Amen.