

Martin Luther was a very religious man, doing everything that would make God happy. As a monk, he went on pilgrimages, kissed relics, gave money, and even beat himself until he lost consciousness. He knew the externals of religion very well but he still was not at peace. Paul's words to the Romans helped Luther to see that faith wasn't his doing things but accepting what God had already done. God's love for him in Christ became, in Jeremiah's words, written on his heart. External religion became internal faith for Luther and he was never the same.

Reformation Day reminds us of the difference between external religion and internal faith. The book *Growing Up Lutheran* is one that many of us can identify with. Lutheranism, like any other denomination, has its own set of traditions; Jell-O salad at potlucks in the proper liturgical color, locks on the coffee cabinet, the unique smell of a church basement or an old sanctuary, the unquestioned authority of the women of the kitchen or altar guild. There were things we did because we were Lutheran, and no one had to tell us they were important.

While the externals of religion have their place, faith only lives when it is written on the heart, when God's declared love for us in Christ becomes personal. We Lutherans don't like to use the word conversion because that sounds like a revival term, but can you think of a time when the gospel became written on your heart? It may have happened while you were in a worship service, bible study, prayer or even singing a hymn. If it has happened to you, then you can identify with Luther. You know how attitude changes once religion's externals become faith's internal. Luther was a far different man once the gospel caught hold of his heart.

People all over the world are very good at religion's **externals**, doing whatever it proscribes as necessary; recitation of certain prayers, making financial gifts, memorizing

verses. Whatever forms these take, they are supposed to draw us closer to God and can be helpful in doing just that but often they become a just a habit or superstitious custom. While visiting Thailand 40 years ago, I watched as young women approached a giant cement pillar, kneeling and leaving their offerings of flowers and money at its base. I was told that they were young wives trying to get pregnant by bribing a Goddess of fertility.

The people to whom Jeremiah wrote did religious externals well too. They kept the proscribed laws of diet and morals, but still didn't feel close to God. Many people do what they think good Christians should do but feel empty inside. If the heart isn't involved then faith doesn't stand a chance. Of all the creatures in the world, however, the human heart is the most difficult to capture. As a boy I had a "havaheart" trap which captured animals alive and I set out to see what exotic creature I could trap. I caught indignant squirrels and protesting blue jays, but nothing more. The human heart is likewise elusive, especially in matters of faith

Moving from religious externals to internal faith is a process that may take a while. It involves continuing study and prayer, remaining open to all that God has to show you, aware of your role as perpetual student. It involves surrendering your will to God's direction and purpose for you, giving up the illusion that you are in charge. It involves a change in thinking, where you read the words of John 3:16 and 17 putting your own name in place of the pronouns. It involves realizing that you don't know as much as you think you did about faith. It involves a surrendering where life is more about God and less about you.

What encourages us in these things is what encouraged Luther, the heart of the gospel itself. God's gift of love to us in Jesus Christ is permanent because your name is written on God's heart. God sent Christ into this world to be among us so that we might glimpse God's intention for us. This God is patient, waiting for us to learn that grace is a gift not earned

through works. God has called you by name, and you are God's in Christ forever! Knowing this with the head is good; knowing it with the heart is life changing.

I visited one of our members this past week who has been diagnosed with cancer. They are going through treatment with determination but also being realistic. For the first time in their life, they are thinking about dying and the promise for Christians about what lies beyond death. Faith has become personal, not just something talked about piously in church but something they now feel in their heart. They feel, in their own words, the "strangest kind of peace". God has "written on their heart" and faith now is far different than it was before.

Martin Luther was a very religious man but when the gospel caught his heart, he began a reformation, or, better said, a restoration of the Christian church that literally changed the course of human history. We thank God for people like Luther and others whose faith set them on fire, but our prayers this day are also that the gospel again catches our heart, and the task of sharing God's love continues to reform the lives of all around us.

+ Deo Gracia +