

# **"The Unwanted, Needed Gift"**

**Romans 3:19-28 -- John 8:31-36**

**October 31, 2004**

*The Rite of Confirmation /Reformation Sunday*

*I suppose that there are many things that I could speak with you about today. I have considered speaking about the "new covenant" referred to in our first scripture reading for today - that new covenant / new promise is so powerful because the promise is that God will be our God - loving and saving us irrespective of how good we are at keeping the commandments or holding up our end of the bargain when we claimed to be a Christian.*

*With it being reformation Sunday, a little history of the Reformation and how we came to be a church seemed in order - - - but maybe a bit dull.*

*The big vote is on Tuesday - and there has been a lot of cross over between religion and politics – I am sure that if I really tried I could get myself into all kinds of trouble - but it would be exciting.*

*And with this not only being Reformation day but also that 'other great holiday' I really wanted to talk about the article that I read about a school district that announced the cancellation of all Halloween activities - not because of any conflict with the Christian faith but because it was offensive to the Wiccan religion. The adherents of the Wiccan religion call themselves witches and although a district spokeswoman said that Wiccans who met with school officials did not ask for cancellation of Halloween events, they did express that they are offended by images of witches with pointy noses flying on broomsticks. I am sure that there is an October 31<sup>st</sup> sermon in there somewhere.*

*All of these great sermon topics notwithstanding, I decided that the topic of the day would be gifts and gift giving. Gift giving is not an easy thing. Today, our confirmation students will gather in various locations - and there will be good food and folks will gather around and there will be gifts. Some of them will be things that you are really excited about - others will not excite you so much. But being the great kids that you are, I know you will smile politely and accept every gift with a word of thanks and appreciation.*

*I suppose that all of us have experienced those kinds of awkward moments when we have received gifts that we don't know what to do with. With apologies to those who love to give 'fruitcake' at Christmas, I read that an American Express survey about Christmas gifts found that the fruitcake was chosen most often (31%) from a list of "worst" holiday gifts. It even finished ahead of "no gift at all." It was suggested that the Christmas fruitcake might be recycled as a gift for the host of New Year's party. Gift giving is not easy when we have so much. I also read that men are terrible gift givers - and typically the only person they end up getting gifts for are their wives. The article suggest that men need to be careful. It was*

*enlightening and - men, if you need a copy of the list, talk to me later. {For you reading this on the web, I will include the article at the end.}*

*The Bible tells us today that God has a gift for you. But I have a sense that most of us aren't very interested in it. It does not come in a box and it is not wrapped in pretty paper with a bow on it. It is not chocolate and will not fit in a plastic Halloween pumpkin. And it is a gift that we can not just put in the closet or recycle in some way. It is personalized and just for you individually. When told about the gift, many of us in the church will nod politely and say 'Well, isn't that wonderful!' But the fact is that we just aren't too excited – we have much to much going on in our lives and in our world to give the gift much thought.*

*Let me just tell you what the gift is and you decide. The gift is grace! The gift is justification that comes through that grace. The gift is faith that allows us to believe that God would give us the gift. "..... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified by his grace as a gift ....."!!! Tell me truthfully, would you be more excited about getting a new car for confirmation - or justification by His grace? Would you be happier about jewelry, a gift certificate, a new hammer or even a fruitcake then you would be about a gift of justification by grace through faith?*

*It is all very churchy. But there it is - a gift for you today! Will you accept it with joy and thank the giver with all of your heart?*

*Maybe I am being a bit cynical. Maybe somewhere deep within us all we know that we need this gift and want it. But too often I think that we are very much like the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking in our Gospel text today. Jesus talked to them about being disciples and knowing the truth and being free. They were offended. Why would anyone give them freedom when they already believed that they had it. Why would they need to 'continue in the word of Jesus' to be free when they were happy with things the way they were? ----- We are pretty content with where we are. We have a pretty comfortable life. We can always enjoy a few 'good gifts' but life is basically pretty good. And we are pretty good people. We go to church when we can – give an offering – sing the songs even when they are unsingable and dull – and even sit thru boring sermons. We are pretty good people. You who are about to be confirmed have endured the classes dealing with Biblical history and Lutheran theology. You have finished the requirements. And I am sure that if we stood you up and quizzed you before the congregation you could all recite Luther's explanation to the third article of the Creed and correctly tell the story of the people of Israel from the time of Abraham through to the Babylonian conquest. You are good people – what would you do with a gift of grace? Armed with your red stole and signed Confirmation certificate, I am sure that you will go forth from this place this morning never to sin again and ready to march up to the pearly gates with confidence when that time comes.*

*Well, maybe we know better than that. But still it is hard to get too excited about this gift of justification by grace. There are so many other things that we think would be more fun – so many things that we might want more – so many things that the world has to offer.*

*But we need the gift. It is a gift that is beyond comparing with any other gift. And there will be times when all of us realize that. Those times will come when the darkness of the world sneaks up on us and we feel lost in the darkness. We will realize how needed the gift is when we stumble in the darkness and find that we have done the wrong things. It will come in those moments when we turn our back*

*on God and try to go our own way - when the world entices us to do only what feels good in those moments. And when we stumble we will experience the darkness of guilt, shame, anger, loneliness, a total lack of peace or hope. In those moments of brokenness I want you to remember that God has given you a gift - whether you have claimed it or not - no matter if you have opened it before or not. Grace, forgiveness, faith, life – given freely and in love. Given to you. Open it to find freedom and life!*

**AMEN**

**Article Mentioned above:**

***What not to Buy Your Wife:** Although the only person a man usually shops for is his wife, the whole experience is a stressful one. Many a man has felt extreme frigid temperatures for a long period based on a poor present decision. As a veteran of these wars, I'm still not sure what to buy my wife, but I'll pass on what not to buy her:*

- 1. Don't buy anything that plugs in. Anything that requires electricity is seen as utilitarian.***
- 2. Don't buy clothing that involves sizes. The chances are one in seven thousand that you will get her size right, and your wife will be offended the other 6999 times. "Do I look like a size 16?" she'll say. Too small a size doesn't cut it either: "I haven't worn a size 8 in 20 years!"***
- 3. Avoid all things useful. The new silver polish advertised to save hundreds of hours is not going to win you any brownie points.***
- 4. Don't buy anything that involves weight loss or self-improvement. She'll perceive a six-month membership to a diet center as a suggestion that's she's overweight.***
- 5. Don't buy jewelry. The jewelry your wife wants, you can't afford. And the jewelry you can afford, she doesn't want.***
- 6. Finally, don't spend too much. "How do you think we're going to afford that?" she'll ask. But don't spend too little. She won't say anything, but she'll think, "Is that all I'm worth?"***