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### The Church of the Abiding Presence of the United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg location Reformation Day

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## The Church of the Abiding Presence of the United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg location Reformation Day

Rev. Dr. J. Jayakiran Sebastian<sup>1</sup>

**Texts:** Jeremiah 31:31-34 (*A new covenant written on the heart*); Psalm 46

**Second Reading:** Romans 3:19-28 (*Justified by God's grace as a gift*)

**Gospel:** John 8:31-36 (*Jesus says, Continue in my word and you will know the truth*)

*"Twenty times your age in months + six times your height in inches + your weight in pounds."*

No, this is not some math formula that held the key to the mysteries of the universe or to the mystery of human existence. This was something that we lived with year after year in my school in Bangalore, India. Every year, a month before the annual sports meet, all students who intended to take part in the large number of events – running, jumping, throwing the shotput, participating in the relays, and all the various events that made this so central to the life of the school had to report to the sports teachers where we were lined up, our date of birth checked, our height measured, and we had to stand on an old weighing scale with hanging balance weights. Once this had been done, there were the trusted older students who carefully calculated what “Twenty times your age in months + six times your height in inches + your weight in pounds,” came up to and that number determined which cohort you would compete with. The entire school was divided into X Division, A Division, B and so on all the way down to F. Cohorts cut across various grades – one couldn’t make oneself younger, shorter, or less heavy in order to be in a cohort where you had a better chance to win a medal. No, the formula was inviolable: “Twenty times your age in months + six times your height in inches + your weight in pounds.” Much as I would like to recount to you my glorious exploits on the sports fields, I need to tell you that I qualified once in D Division for the 6x50 meters relay and my team came last; in C Division, a year later, for the 4x75 meters relay, where my team came last; and finally, when I was in Grade ten and in the X Division, I had watched people doing the Triple Jump – we called it “Hop, Step, and Jump” and I fancied myself soaring through the air, gracefully, but ingloriously did not even reach the landing pit, but came down with a thud several feet away on the hard ground to be jeered – not cheered – by all those who were watching. No, the formula did not work in my favor.

People love the simplicity and clarity of a formula. What could be simpler than a formula that very clearly, and in a straightforward manner, told you exactly where you stood in relation to God and God’s church? People wanted to know and were willing to listen and to pay to be on the right side of God and those who they believed were divinely ordained to represent God on earth. There’s something almost beautiful in a formula which clearly stated how much one needed to pay, what this would get them, what results this would have, and how this would benefit them. Who doesn’t want to be “in” with God and the authorities and

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be certain that you are in good standing? What better acknowledgement of this could one have than a certificate stating that the formula had been consulted, things were good, and the pathway to heaven through the forgiveness of sins guaranteed because of what you did in terms of fulfilling the obligations through the financial contribution. No complicated tax code; no schedules to be filled; no dreaded letters from the IRS saying that you had been selected for an audit – no, God was in heaven, his regents ruled on earth, and all's right in the world. Why disrupt and question such a simple and beautiful formula?

Well – here we are 500 years after the formula was questioned with one pithy comment: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying ‘Do penance ...’ wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence.” This is the opening sentence of the invitation that a young teacher of theology in a new university in a rather obscure German town offered as a point of disputation to clarify the power of indulgences. The formula had been called into question! The formula had been called into question by that repository of God's communication with humankind, the Bible, as the basis and method – the basis and method not just then, but now, of calling into question our certainties, our stubbornness, our hard-heartedness, our simplistic assumptions, our casual racism, sexism, ageism, denominationalism, and our shallow and shabby understanding of sin and repentance.

Yes – the message of the Bible has travelled far and wide and the hope of salvation in and through Jesus has touched the hearts and lives of many people all over the world. Of course things were happening years, decades, and centuries before the events in the early sixteenth century in Wittenberg, but the reformation provided impulses and proved to be a catalyst impacting people, places, events, and epochs in ways that the great reformers in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and beyond could never have imagined. However, it's not just the message of the Bible, and the one to whom the Bible bears witness, who has travelled, but the Bible as an artifact itself has travelled. In many places postcolonial thinking and analysis have had to deal with the Bible as an object, even as an imperial artifact. The fetishization of the Bible has had all kinds of consequences, even during the recent hurricanes, where verses from the Bible were used to predict anything from the end of the world to judgment because of the perceived lifestyles and choices of people who are easily demonized and made into scapegoats. Yes – the closed Bible or the Bible from which a few verses are brandished as a weapon of destruction has been flung around, quoted and misquoted, used and abused.

Using the Bible to prove something – from why tattoos are taboo, or about women wearing trousers, from justifying financial stability as the unshakeable sign of God's blessing, to vindicating slavery, apartheid, and social stratification, from using it to beat down other sacred texts, to the colonial annihilation of native populations, because “the Bible says so” is something that we continue to contend with today, even within what seems to be the most welcoming and hospitable spaces. One thinks of a young monk, filled with passionate intensity, who often proved to be a cranky and bitter man, who lapsed back into a formula to justify the killing of the marginalized peasants who were clamoring for land and tax reform, and questioning the ongoing existence of Jewish communities near the cities of his birth.

There are many trajectories in the Bible – trajectories that are clear from the time of the priestly reinterpreters of the myths of origin and the formation of national identity to the redactors of the sayings of the great prophets; from the variety and range of situations and emotions addressed in the Psalms, to the pursuit and grasping of wisdom; from the recollections of the history of the judges and kings to the specificity of the so-called minor

prophets; and coming to the Greek scriptures, from the vivid recollections of the deeds and teachings of Jesus, to the apocalyptic visions of a new Jerusalem; from the events detailing the spread of Christianity, to letters written to new churches; from the discussions and disputes over appropriate behavior, to the reminders of what the Thursday supper was all about. These trajectories inform the readings of the day, readings whose powerful challenges have echoed down the years and continue to reverberate today.

The prophet Jeremiah realized as to how quickly ritualistic forms of religion could deteriorate into idolatry, and reminds his readers and us about the gracious activity of God, who continues to act and interact in terms of a new creation and a new covenant, sweeping away the human propensity to concretize a formula. “Remembering their sin no more”, the new covenant constantly offers new opportunities and beckons us to fresh possibilities in our journey with God and to God, a journey in which we constantly discover that journeying itself is the goal and that on this journey our covenantal obligations to God and God’s graciousness to us are not measured in terms of reward and punishment; in terms of a carrot and stick; in terms of measurable expectations and promised outcomes. No, this is a journey where we are constantly surprised by the “God of all grace” who knows who we are “from the least of us to the greatest” and for whom this status doesn’t matter, since in Paul’s words “there is no distinction.” This is what Paul reminds us again and again as to how the reified word made hollow and devoid of content can easily become the law of judgment and the formula of condemnation, and how one needs to recognize time and again about the deeper intentions and liberating message of the law of love and of grace freely given, given to all, for “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Events have consequences – Jesus knew that and despite what awaited him “set his face firmly towards Jerusalem.” The son who has a “permanent place in the household of God” offers to us the gift of companionship and welcome, a gift that we have not earned through being who we are, or what we have done, or what we have achieved, or from what family we came, or even how well we think we know our Bible. The gift of freedom to be who we are, not defined by being the descendants of Abraham or belonging to the right caste, or claiming the privilege of birth and status, or whatever gives us standing and status in human society, but those for whom the message of acceptance and the reality of unmerited and abounding grace is not something to be debated, measured, and counted, but just that – free, continuing to wash over us like the waters of baptism, whether that water comes from the Ganges, the Jordan, the Tiber, or from Wawa.

Events have consequences – Luther knew that and despite what awaited him offered up for debate the ninety-five theses, the ninety-fourth of which states that “Christians must be encouraged diligently to follow Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell ...”, to follow Christ even if it meant smashing through a formula. The cost and consequences of discipleship, especially in terms of the world-wide missionary movement, and the reality that events that unfolded amidst the dusty roads of Galilee; events in the little German town of Wittenberg; events that resulted in Reformed missionaries from north Switzerland and Lutherans missionaries from South Germany coming to South-western India more than a 180 years ago, setting in motion unexpected consequences leading to me standing here in Gettysburg today preaching this sermon; events taking place at the United Lutheran Seminary, events unfolding in the worldwide ecumenical movement, are all ongoing testimony to the liberating and loving power of our Lord, drawing together people across places, across space and time, overcoming possible limitations with the limitless possibilities

of the promise that “if the Son makes us free, we shall be free indeed.” Jesus says, “Continue in my word and you will know the truth.” And to the one who breaks through the formula and leads us to the truth of God be glory, now and forever.

Amen