

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 22-23, 2017**  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

***“Reformation 500 – The Augsburg Confession: Righteousness Before God”***

Some years ago, I read a book, *The Great Emergence*, by Phyllis Tickle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008). The author is the founding editor of the Religion Department of *Publishers Weekly*, as well as a highly respected authority and popular speaker on religion in America today. In her book, Phyllis Tickle observes that about every 500 years, things shift and major transformation happens within the life of the church. For example, 500 years ago was the Great Reformation – something we’re celebrating in this Reformation 500 anniversary year. And 500 years before that was the Great Schism in 1054 when there was a split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church. And 500 years before that was Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.), the Roman pontiff who emerged as the leader of faith and civilization at the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west. And 500 years before that was the Great Deliverance with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Her 500-year epochs go back even further into Old Testament history, but you’ll need to read the book if you want to know about that. You may not agree with everything that the author has to say. I myself did not, but her point is well-taken: we are at this very time – 500 years after the Reformation – on the cusp of a great shift and a major transformation in the life of the church. This is the “Great Emergence.” What exactly this is, we do not yet know as we are living through it. There is general agreement that things are indeed shifting rapidly all around us, including the church. All of this makes for high anxiety and great concern. But there is a word of hope from the author in this regard: history has shown that the church does not dissolve or go away, but through all of these shifts and transformations emerges renewed and strengthened to meet emerging challenges. What cannot and must not change through shifts and transformations is the central truth of our Christian faith: that we are made righteous and acceptable before God not through our own efforts, but through the grace of God in Jesus Christ alone. Our summer preaching series on the Augsburg Confession continues today as we focus on “Justification: Righteousness Before God.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Article IV of the Augsburg Confession, “Justification,” has been called the article on which the church stands or falls. So what does this mean? It means that when the people of Christ hold fast to the saving truth that we are saved by grace alone, that this is the gift of God, not because of our own works (Ephesians 2:8-9), then we are standing on the solid rock of Scriptural truth. However, when the people of Christ lose sight of how we are made righteous and acceptable to God, and come to rely on our own efforts, then we are in grave danger of losing what it means to be Christian. It is that important! Article IV states this clearly:

*It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.*

Grace – God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense – is central to our life in Christ. It is the bedrock of our faith. But this is challenged again and again within and without the church. It is natural for us to believe that we are justified by what we do. This is the oldest religion in the world, and it is alive and well today! This belief system, in whatever form it may take, holds that we make ourselves acceptable and pleasing to God by what we do. It is rooted in sinful pride that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and claw our way into heaven. But here’s the thing: how do you know when you’ve done enough to please God? How do you know if you’ve been good enough for God to love you? That nagging doubt in the back of our

mind tells us: “How do you know? Are you sure?” The truth is, this will give us no peace because we will never know for certain. We will be left hanging, wondering and worrying: what happens when I die?

In Jesus, we can know for certain where we stand with God. We don't need to be left hanging because Jesus himself took our place when he was hanging upon the cross. That should have been each and every one of us on that cross! But **“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). And that is Gospel, which means good news. Jesus not only lived that life of perfect obedience to God that we could never do, he also died the death we rightly deserved because of our sin and disobedience. And all that Jesus has done, he now freely gives to everyone who receives him in faith. It is a gift we in no way deserve, but God graciously gives it for Jesus' sake. This means that we don't have to worry or wonder about where we stand with God and what happens when we die. In Jesus, our future is secure and we have the certainty of everlasting life in him. That is why Article IV of the Augsburg Confession is so very important. It holds forth the saving truth of how we are made righteous before God. That gift is received through the preaching of God's Word, through the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, through the Body and Blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. In Word and Sacrament, Christ comes to us to assure us that he has paid the price of our salvation. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (thank you, Star Wars!), I was a Confirmation student. And, lo and behold, now I'm teaching Confirmation! I can still remember what my Confirmation pastor, the sainted Rev. E.H. Streufert, said about all of this. He shared with us that righteousness before God, justification, means that for Jesus' sake God now sees me “just as if I” had never sinned. Cool! I've always remembered that and held onto it. I hope it's helpful to you as well.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds. So what's the connection between this and the gift of our own righteousness in Jesus? The dilemma is that God's children who are declared righteous for Jesus' sake live side-by-side in the world with evil. At times, God's children cry out to him for deliverance. Do you know what that's like in your own life? Has there been a time when particular circumstances or particular people have sorely tested you, so much so that you prayed to God that He would just pull you out of that terrible situation? God in his wisdom may not do this. Perplexed and frustrated, we ask, “But why?” There is nothing more beautiful than a field of golden-ripe wheat, ready to be harvested. It's not until that field of wheat is ready for harvest, changing from an immature green color to a mature golden color, that the weeds are clearly visible. If you rush in to pull up or cut down the weeds, you run the risk of pulling up or cutting down the very wheat you're trying to grow. The weeds Jesus refers to in the Gospel lesson are probably darnel, a somewhat poisonous weed that looks very much like wheat in its early stages. Because of this, it's hard to tell the two apart when they first start growing. The roots of the plants intertwine. This is why the landowner in the parable said to his servants who wanted to go and pull out all the weeds from the wheat field: **“No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”** (Matthew 13:29-30). The Lord reminds us that even when we see multitudinous weeds springing up all around us, even within the church itself, we are not to worry, for God himself will take care of this in his own good time. Though the weeds continue to grow, and at times even flourish, crowding out the precious wheat, all is not lost. The Lord's purpose is not thwarted. When the day of harvest comes, the wisdom of Christ will be revealed. The final judgement is reserved for the final day, and this belongs to God, not to us. God is the One who will separate the wheat from the weeds on that final day. Until then, let us take heart that no matter what may happen in this life, we stand justified before God for Jesus' sake, clothed in Christ's own robe of righteousness. Be at peace: our lives and our future are secure in the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. Amen.