

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

The Five Solas of the Reformation Solus Christus – Christ Alone

Saved by grace through faith alone, faith in Christ alone.

In our lives we experience times when we can figure things out on our own. Families experience crisis, marriages are broken, divorce happens, or we find ourselves at odds with our children, siblings, even parents. Sometimes divisions are experienced within families due to death and the reading of a will, or just plain old not knowing how to get along. In can be in these times that one may call on a mediator to negotiate a way forward, to determine a settlement, maybe even bring about a sense of wholeness and healing.

We can experience this in the work place as well. Many are or have been members of unions, if nothing else you have heard of businesses, professions such as manufacturing, teaching or nursing, even doctors, coming to a place where there seemed to be no way to come to terms or agreement. A mediator will be brought in to see if they can bring two sides back to the table, see possibilities, and forge a new contract.

We understand the need for a mediator in some scenarios in life. As Christians, we may not realize it or understand fully what it means, but to understand our faith is to understand on some level that Christ came as the ultimate mediator.

In the children's story, today I showed how there is a great distance between us and God. God is holy and we are not. It was in Christ, who was one with God, coming to live a fully human life that ended with death on a cross, that a way was made or, bridged the chasm, that separated us from God.

Now this has always been understood, but by the time of the early 1500's the church had added a few things to the word of God. Now no one had really recognized what had happened. As with many things, it just slowly evolved to the point where the church and the priest had become like an extra mediator between the people and God. The Church claimed to have a corner on grace, and it alone could dispense it; and so, if you wanted grace, you had to go through the appointed means. The church became very powerful to the point that it was thought that there could be no grace without the church.

Then came those who were in the church particularly Martin Luther, who began to read and understand the scriptures in a new light. His reading of scripture and that of others, had them take a stance that said no, scripture says Christ is the ultimate mediator. The church was wrong. Needless to say, this did not go over well with the authorities. But

that is another sermon. For now, let's go back to the conversation about Christ the mediator.

So what would be the necessary qualifications of a mediator between God and people?

In the Old Testament and in the Jewish faith the high priest served as mediator between God and the people. These priests were just like everyone else in that they too were sinful. It was the high priest who brought sacrifices into the Holy of Holies once a year. The story is told that the high priest would be tethered with a rope around his ankle in case the holiness was so overwhelming he would have to be pulled out.

For Christians, Jesus is the high priest, except that he exceeds in this capacity to serve as mediator between God and sinful humanity. Jesus was not just the mediator but the actual source of salvation. In the past the priest had to keep going back time and again to offer sacrifices. Jesus is eternal, as Christ his sacrifice was offered once for all.

We hear the story on Good Friday of how the curtain was torn in two in the temple. This curtain separated the holy of holies from the people. This tearing symbolized that there was no longer that separation between God and God's people.

Again, in the Old Testament the high priest was also a pastor. A priest needed to be compassionate, sympathetic to human weakness. Their own failings enable them to be sympathetic and to treat confused and sinful people with gentleness and understanding. Even today as a Minister of Word and Sacrament the ability to be compassionate is an important part of my calling. Without compassion ministers might just sound like a clanging cymbal, lots of words, but no understanding.

Jesus is a pastor. His humanity, his becoming flesh and blood, allowed him to experience all the struggle that people face. But he was able to do it without falling into despair, losing of faith, and sinning. He did suffer, but it is important to remember that suffering is not sin. Suffering is part of the human condition.

Jesus' suffering and pain taught obedience. His frailty deepened his reverence for God. Jesus always remembered that he was the Son. Which meant that not only did he have compassion, but Jesus knew that his greatest work would be to bring people home to God.

So a mediator between God and people must be a high priest, a pastor and third, the priest must be appointed. Once again, looking to the Old Testament we learn that it was from the Tribe of Levi that priests were appointed. This was Aaron's, the brother of Moses' lineage. One never volunteered to be a priest, this was a calling by God.

Jesus too was appointed but not through the regular lineage. It is told in Genesis (14:17-20) that Melchizedek of Salem, gave a blessing to Abraham and received a tithe in return. This was long before the tribes were named. It is through this lineage of Melchizedek that the writer of Hebrews draws our attention to the appointment of Jesus

Christ as High Priest. This priest, Melchizedek, came before all others and Jesus came even before that.

This passage and Hebrews itself is so dense with language and theology that a sermon does not, nor cannot touch on all the nuances. But with this background let us look at Jesus as high priest and what that means for us today.

One of the difficult issues for me as I grew up in the church was this idea that Jesus had to die on the cross for my sin. It was difficult as it seemed somewhat sadistic to me. I had not yet come to grips with this even as I have been preaching these last few years. This week I listened to a podcast that finally helped me understand more fully.

Now the part I have always gotten was that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. But I want to read to you the transcript from Groundwork online, from the Christian Reformed Church.

When we talk about the work of salvation through Christ alone, that does not mean that the Father and the Holy Spirit are not intimately involved. The work of salvation is the work of all three persons in the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Certainly, we do not want to get the idea that the Father was angry with us and so the Son had to appease him and say: Daddy, calm down. I will take care of this. No; they were working in concert all along. So, although we say in Christ alone, it is also through the Father and the Spirit alone - through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all working together in concert to bring about our salvation. It is focused on Christ because he is the one who became incarnate: The Son of God; but it is all three of them.¹

So if we are to understand salvation and the work of the cross we need to understand that the Trinity works together. The other piece, is that we need to understand that we are in need of saving and today that is not an easy place to go. We don't like to talk about sin, we think of ourselves as pretty self-sufficient, so to think that we live lives of sin, well not many of us would really say that about ourselves.

But until we see ourselves as sinful, the need for a saviour just isn't there.

I want to share again a little more from that same podcast.

Christian Smith has coined a term: Moral therapeutic deism. It is where a lot of people think that God is just sort of a kindly old man upstairs who is not that upset about our sins, is not really appearing in our lives; you know, just be good, go along to get along, live and let live and God will reward you with heaven. So, if anything, the way we think and live today is obscuring a focus on the need for Christ. It is not that we are looking to saints or other go-betweens as in the Reformation, it is sort of some people seem to think: I don't need a go-between in the first place.²

¹ <https://groundwork.reframemedia.com>. Accessed October 14, 2017.

² Ibid.

I'm not that bad. But the mere fact that we call ourselves Christians, that we are sitting here in this church says that we may not have it figured out, maybe we need to look at this. If you have not considered how Holy God is, how amazing, forgiving, loving, and awesome, let today be the day that you do so.

We have spoken about other world religions before and how Christianity is the only one that offers grace. In all others you must earn whatever it is you are seeking. Grace is a free gift. One of the other things is that in other religions people are seeking God. In Christianity, God is seeking us. God loves creation and humanity so much that God wants to be in relationship with us.

Sin has separated us from God who is holy. But Christ's saving work on the cross has made a bridge over the chasm that separated us from God. And this was God's work, the Son's work and the Spirit's work.

We can learn and benefit from what's true in other religions, as one does from science, philosophy, and the arts. But none of those other truths can save us. They might make us better human beings, but they cannot reconcile us to the one true God.

We are saved by grace through faith alone, and that faith in Christ alone. Nothing more need be added. No works, no person, nothing extra. Just Jesus Christ. We all need saving. All have fallen short of the glory of God. We are imperfect and there is no getting around it. But God's great love, unfathomable desire to be in relationship with people has led to this amazing sacrifice. You are loved, you are valuable. You are God's. Let this truth sink into the depth of your being. This is our God.

The response to all this is to love others and not be afraid to share your faith. It is an amazing journey and it is offered to all.

In Christ with Christ and through Christ. Amen.