



President Walton's October 2020 Message

Powerful Witnesses for Jesus



Over the next few weeks many congregations will prepare for very different Reformation celebrations. There was once a time, many years ago, when Lutheran Christians would gather for rally days or large worship services which gathered folks from Lutheran Churches around a particular area. Often times these services would feature a guest speaker like Oswald Hoffman or some other personality. Larger venues were rented because none of the churches could even contain the numbers who participated. It seemed to me, as a young boy, like the Billy Graham Crusades I had seen on television.

For several years in my first parish I was blessed to participate with other LCMS churches in a Reformation gatherings. I still remember how nervous I was the year I was the preacher. We usually had a couple of hundred people gather, although our congregations were many miles apart. Over the years the attendance waned, especially when the Braves were in the World Series. Life gets busy with so many other activities which choke out opportunities for worship. In the past 10 years I have participated in some form of Reformation gathering almost every single year, but none like what I remember growing up. These celebrations were formative. I've come to realize many of the men and women at those events are part of the cloud of witnesses which surround me and help shape my life in Christ! I can clearly look back and see how these events pointed me to Jesus!

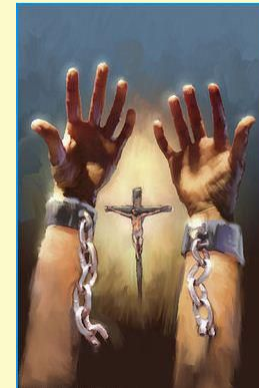
The writer of Hebrews wrote, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Who are those cloud of witnesses in your life? They are the ones who pointed you to Jesus in good times and in difficulties. Once you became a child of God He carefully and lovingly placed people in your life to guide you. Often these are people well known to you like your parents or siblings, your grandparents or other relatives. Perhaps it was a pastor, teacher, classmate or co-worker. These are people who, in large ways or small ways, encourage, at times admonish, and remind you of the grace of God in Jesus. These are by no means perfect people. They have the same flaws we each possess. They, too, are sinners, redeemed by the blood of Jesus. They also have a cloud of witnesses surrounding them, encouraging them, and pointing them to Jesus. Author Alex Haley once said, *“If you see a turtle on top of a fence post, it didn't get there by itself.”* We all need this cloud of witnesses, even when we are unaware.

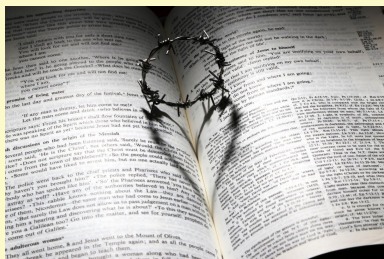
This month, as we celebrate Clergy Appreciation and the Reformation, realize that Luther had a cloud of witnesses that cheered him on during his darkest days. Pastors were not born

pastors! They are, in some way, guided by the Holy Spirit, to become a pastor. The same could be said of teachers, or really of any believer. God surrounds us with this powerful cloud of witnesses to remind us that we are not alone—ever! Not only has He promised to never leave or forsake us, He has also placed people in our lives. Sometimes we simply have to stop and open our eyes to see them.

What I've learned over time is not only are each of us surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, by God's grace, we are also witnesses in the cloud for others around us. When we are so graciously surrounded by witnesses, we may not remember we, too, are called to be witnesses pointing people to Jesus. When I forget the importance of bearing witness, life becomes self-serving, and this, my friends, is a great definition of sin. God's call to us in Jesus is to freely share what we ourselves have received from Him. Jesus said, "**Freely you have received, freely give!**" While we may not feel we have much to offer as a witness for Jesus, keep in mind what empowers my witness, and yours too, is keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. As we live with Jesus at the center of our lives we cannot help but live as His powerful witnesses.



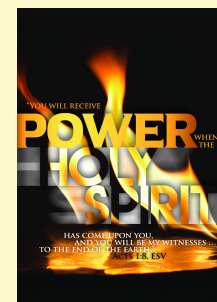
Someone has said "you may be the only Jesus someone ever sees." I think the point is, how we live our faith in the world matters, especially in a world where the Church is seen as hypocritical and judgmental. How refreshing it is when the Christians operate in love and humility. I once had the privilege of meeting Billy Graham at The Cove in North Carolina. It was his camp, and I was there for an evangelism seminar. He wasn't scheduled to be there, but showed up, and like a groupie flocking to a rock star, I dashed up to him and shook his hand. Edith was so embarrassed. Two things I remember about that encounter. First, he was one tall dude! More importantly, he took the time to talk to this young pastor while others gathered around him. For the few moments we talked, I had his full attention, and you could visibly see the love of Jesus in him, in how he listened and in his body language. I could see it in his eyes. Oh to be like this, especially in these days when we definitely are encountering more people outside our church than in it! Even in a day when masks are essential, the love of Jesus can flow through our eyes and our body language, maybe even more so than our words!



In a time when gathering is already restricted, when health concerns swell around us still, when fear of resurging viral infections are threatened, how do we bear witness to our faith in Jesus? We are learning the relative value of social media as more and more churches have created an online presence. In many ways it lacks the personal touch which we were so accustomed to having with our Christian friends. For many the reach of sharing the good news of Jesus has expanded beyond the church campus, and in some

cases is now reaching across the world. Yet, often where we can make the biggest difference is in our own home, or neighborhood, or workplace, or school. For some it may be in the grocery store or the mall. It may be in the restaurant, while you're waiting for a table or your food. I have seen how when you engage your servers they truly feel appreciated, and when you ask if you can pray for them, I have never been refused!

Jesus said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." October, when we celebrate the "Pentecost of the Lutheran Church," is a great time to remember we have been empowered to be witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth. How about starting a little closer to home? I'll bet we can all find somebody to share the love and grace of Jesus, and what He's meant to our lives. Sometimes all it takes is a simple testimony of how the love of Jesus has touched our life.



Our future is fixed on Jesus! We can depend on Him. Can He depend on us? He has given us so much, and we have so much for which we can still look forward—if not in this life, then in eternity. No matter who you have been in the past or how you have lived; no matter

where you have been or what you have done; the grace of Jesus covers over all our sins. He redeemed us with purpose. He has surrounded each of us with a great cloud of witnesses pointing us to Jesus. This is not the place for us to stop and rest, at least not forever! He has given to us so we might give to others. As I've said before, He has made us rivers for His grace to flow through rather than reservoirs that hold His grace in. He has made each of us part of the cloud of witnesses for others. You have the opportunity daily to positively or negatively influence another for Jesus. You may just never know who your witness is touching. As we fix our eyes on Jesus may we continue to grow in His Word as His witnesses for the sake of His kingdom, living out His grace and love right where we are! It could produce a new and true Reformation for our lives!

In His Peace,
Greg

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to access the program register through this link:
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