

"HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 30, 1994

"HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN?"

INTRODUCTION

A fifth grader is reported to have asked his Sunday School teacher,

"Where is heaven? I don't know."

Before the Sunday School teacher could come up with an answer to this heavy question, another eleven year old began to address the class of eight boys and three girls in response to the question of the hour. Said Matthew,

"That's easy. The way you get to heaven is to go to the North Pole, put it in neutral and then go straight up....that will get you to heaven!"

Well, that's one way to get there...according to the generation brought up on Star Trek. But just so there's no misunderstanding, however, let me rephrase the question: how are you going to get into heaven once you arrive at the "pearly gates?" This was a bit of a concern for Martin Luther, too, for some may recall that he did something on October 31st, 1517 that led to what is called the Protestant Reformation.

DEVELOPMENT

Calvin (not John Calvin), but Calvin of the popular cartoon strip of Calvin and Hobbes is pictured lying beneath a tree. He says to Hobbes,

"What if there is no after-life? Just suppose that this is all we get?" Hobbes replies, "Oh, what the heck. I'll take it anyway...." Calvin responds, "Yeah...but if I'm not going to be eventually rewarded for my behavior, then I'd like to know NOW!"

How do we get to heaven? You may feel like the sour old guy who felt that too many people as it is get into heaven in the first place...which reminds me of something that happened during the installation of new lighting inside Liverpool Cathedral not too long ago. It seems that an electrician working in the roof space accidentally left the elevator door open. This prevented the electrician from returning to the ground floor. Visitors were somewhat stunned and shocked to see the Clerk of Works for the Cathedral standing in the middle of the cathedral crossing, yelling heavenward,

"Peter...Peter...close the gates, now!"

HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN

How do you get to heaven? And what does it take?

The Russian Czar, Ivan the Terrible, tortured thousands of citizens. And he indulged in long drunken periods and had seven wives. After each wild affair, Ivan would atone by prostrating himself in front of the high altar of the church with such sincerity that he would bruise his forehead from hitting the stone floor of the church.

Even as a child, Ivan was cruel. He would amuse himself by throwing cats

and dogs off the roof of the Kremlin. And when it was rumored that the city of Novgorod was planning to defect to neighboring Lithuania, Ivan exterminated the city, torturing its citizens for five weeks and killed 60,000 people. In one fit of anger it was reported that he even struck his 27 year-old son in the head with an iron staff, killing him.

On March the 18th, 1584, Ivan died. And following the custom of Russian rulers, it was declared he died a monk. His head was shorn like that of a monk and he was buried in the robes of a monk. It was fully expected that God would be fooled and Ivan would enter heaven with the status of a humble monk.

How do you get to heaven? If you and I had lived back there in the 16th century, we might have been able to buy our way into those pearly gates. And even more startling, we could have bought passage for someone else who had already died. At least that was the impression that many of the common folk had when they purchased indulgences from the representatives of the official church.

This was a perversion of the real purpose of the indulgence, but it was a perversion that is easily understood. The sale of indulgences was a way of raising funds for the church while dealing with the subject of penance. I doubt if there were any yearly financial canvasses. The church's attitude was that even though sin is forgiven, it must still be paid for in the form of penance either through good works in this world or in purgatory in the next. An indulgence simply allowed you to avoid penance by substituting a monetary payment. Or, you could "spring" a loved one from purgatory in the same way.

Those of you who are students of church history will recall that it was such abuses such as this that caused a young priest by the name of Martin Luther, a professor in the University of Wittenberg, to nail up and to post his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. He had been devastated by the corruption he had found in Rome on an earlier visit. And feeling himself to be sinful and rebellious, he made his way to the cathedral and began climbing the Scala Sancta, the "sacred stairs". As he climbed the stairs, he knelt and kissed each step as was the custom. Suddenly a verse of Scripture began haunting him,

"The just shall live by faith!"

And in that moment, it occurred to him that salvation came not through kissing steps, but through one's faith in Christ. Christ's death on the cross was sufficient to cover all his sins. He came to see penance as an "add-on". To him it was not something integral to the faith.

And Martin Luther was simply "re-discovering" something that St. Paul had discovered some 1500 years earlier, for Paul had struggled with a very similar question. What was the relationship of the new Christian faith to the Jewish faith from which it sprung and especially to Jewish Law. For the First Century Jews, the Law was the "Key" to salvation. Keep the Law and you will be acceptable to God. But what happens when you break the Law as everyone is apt to do...sooner or later.

Jews made animal sacrifices to atone for the breaking of the Law. Small sins or modest incomes meant at least a turtledove must be sacrificed, or possibly a lamb. Large sins or greater wealth demanded a bull be sacrificed.

There were different classes of sacrifices that required different kinds of offerings. For instance,

"OLAH was a burnt offering. MINHA was a cereal offering. SELAMIN was a peace of fellowship offering. ASSAM was a guilt offering, while HATTATH was a sin offering."

The guilt offering was mandatory. It required not only an expensive burnt offering - a ran or unblemished lamb - but full restitution of any value deprived of another because of the sin, PLUS a twenty percent penalty given to the offended one.

You begin to see that this was a time-honored way of dealing with sin. It was always an unnecessary one. It's important for us to see this. Paul wanted the early Christians to understand that Jesus was "God's sacrifice" upon the altar of the cross. He atoned for the sins of all. There is nothing else we need to do. Christ has paid it all. He called it justification by faith.

And justification by our faith is really a radical doctrine, if you stop to think about it. Luther went back to Paul's letter to the Romans to find it and find it he did. And that's why October 31st, 1517 is an important date in church history. And many of us in our heart of hearts have a difficult time accepting it. Why...one may wonder....

WE LIKE TO SEE PEOPLE PAY FOR THEIR SINS

For one thing, we like to see people pay for their sins.

This is at the heart of the debate over capital punishment, or so it seems.

Just about the first question that arose out of the tragic O. J. Simpson case this summer was,

"If O. J. is guilty...will they ask for the death penalty?"

Could America stand the thought of a man like OJ Simpson being strapped into an electric chair or taken into the gas chamber? It is one thing to think of some unknown and faceless man on death row being put to death for a crime, but many of us grew up cheering for OJ. He is a handsome man...articulate...and yet, we like to see people pay for their sins...don't we?

And, if the truth be known, many of us would like to pay for our own sins. Ah, wouldn't it be great if we could simply go into the temple and offer up a sacrifice to pay for all our sins? Or, to travel to Rome and kiss those sacred steps and know that our sins have thus been "atoned" for. We'd feel better. Psychologically, that would be a terrific option, wouldn't it?

Kenneth Chafin once said that when he was a young minister he thought his most difficult task was to "convict" people of sin, but later on, he came to realize that it was more difficult to convince them that God really loved them the way they are! He can accept them as being worthy without approving of their sins. They can come into His presence without any pretense, without any smoke screen, without any veneer, and find love, find acceptance, find forgiveness and experience cleansing and hope and new life.

It really is difficult once you have sinned to actually feel forgiven by God. It seems far too easy to simply ask for forgiveness and believe it will be granted. Many would like to have some kind of prescribed penance.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH SPEAKS OF GOD'S CHARACTER

But here is what we need to see and take

in. Justification by faith is saying something to us about the very nature of God, something about His or Her character.

In the May issue of Guideposts magazine, Fulton Ousler, Jr., told a beautiful story that I believe is appropriate here. Young Ousler was only 19 when his father died. He had worked closely with his father in the last years of his life. Often times at night, and on weekends and through four summer vacations, he typed....did research or stood beside his father's desk as he wrote. After much reckless searching, his father had found faith late on in his life, and young Ousler was privileged to share in his work on magazine stories....articles of faith he called them and his efforts to complete the trilogy that had begun with The Greatest Story Ever Told.

Young Ousler had been responsible for his father's library. And he took pride in knowing the exact location of his many, many books and more than 200 personal notes. And so after his father's death, when he went through the things in his father's bedside table drawer, he was astonished to come across a small spiral notebook he had never seen before. As he flipped through it, he saw that the pages consisted of nothing but names....names carefully handwritten in his favorite green ink. First, there were family names. Next came the names of friends, and he saw that his father had included the dead as well as the living. Then there was a blank page, followed by a list of perhaps 20 names, many of which the younger man did not recognize.

He showed the small spiral black notebook to his mother and she said to him,

"Oh....that was his prayer book....every night, before he turned out the light he would open that book, put his finger on each name and prayed in silence." "But who are these?" asked the young Ousler, pointing to the final list. She said, "They were people who had hurt him."

He had been praying for people who had hurt him. I guess we would call that forgiveness. It seems to be a virtue that only few of us are capable of. "I'll forgive" we may say, "But believe me....I won't forget". I think it takes a very special kind of person to forgive so completely.

GOD OFFERS PERFECT FORGIVENESS

But here is the important truth for this Reformation Day message. God, who is perfect, offers perfect forgiveness. When God says we are forgiven, we are forgiven. If it makes you feel better to do some kind of penance for your sin, fine! But understand that it is for your benefit - not God's.

I can say to you, as a representative of God, that you are forgiven...not because of who you are, but because of who God is and what Christ has done on our behalf.

WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE

What is your response to this? To go out and sin again? Put it in human terms. Suppose you had hurt your earthly father or mother very deeply, or your wife or your husband, or even your children...but out of their reservoir of love for you they had forgiven you. Would you go out to hurt them again? I should like to think you would not. Only the most corrupt people keep hurting someone who has forgiven them so completely. This is the motivation for right living, NOT because we fear God, but because we respect such love and such forgiveness and such character that we are drawn up, lifted up and seek to live with that kind of character ourselves.

Said Paul, "The just shall live by faith".

CLOSING

Somebody once said that Columbus discovered a new world, that Copernicus discovered a new heaven, and Luther discovered a new God - a God gracious for the sake of the work of Christ. They all lived at the same time. Their lives overlapped. Justification by faith is just a theological way of expressing a very simple truth, "God loves us completely. God forgives us completely".

Let us go forth on this special reformation Sunday; let us depart with that love and that forgiveness in our hearts.

PRAYER

Deepen our trust and increase our faith in You, O God, who has come to us in Christ. Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in this church, this hour, this day and confirm within us the feelings, the decisions, the resolutions of this hour spent in Your presence. Amen.

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, October 30, 1994

GREETING It's always a very special Sunday for us all when the children of our Church....the boys and girls of our Sunday School...join us down here for a few moments.

We greet them. They're going to sing an anthem for us while they're here...and our thanks to Julie Klein for all she does in helping us to have a Children's Choir. But before they sing we're going to have a baptism...and celebrate the baptism of SOPHIE MARGUERITE KEANE....

Some of you were baptized here in a service like this "not too long ago"....and it won't be too long before SOPHIE is sitting here with the rest of you on a Sunday morning.

BEFORE THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM Before the share in this special moment of Baptism, let me remind the boys and girls of several things....

FIRST: Tomorrow night is Halloween, right.... and this afternoon, here at the church, at what time....four o'clock...to help you "get in the mood", we're having a Harvest Party...Karl...anything you would like to say in connection with it...

SECOND: Next Sunday Julie and Gary Klein will be here at 10:30 to lead us all - adults and children...in a pre-church HYMN SING.... third floor. Hope you'll remember and come early....

THIRD: I like this Sunday...not just because we all get an extra hour of sleep...but because we get to sing MARTIN LUTHER'S great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"....it reminds us that on October 31st, 1517...Martin Luther did something that brought new life into the church of his day. We call this Sunday REFORMATION SUNDAY....those with Lutheran church ties and background - like Mrs. Delson....Barbara Landon...will tell you what he did....95 These posted on a church door.

MOVE ON But let's move on now to the baptism of SOPHIE MARGUERITE KEANE... How blessed she is....not only her parents TOM AND DANA KEANE are here...but also GOD PARENTS....SUSAN BOND (Dana's sister) and PATRICK KEANE (Tom's cousin)....and GRANDPARENTS ARE HERE....Tom's mother, Patricia Keane, Dana's parents, Dave and Kaye Walker...and WOULD YOU BELIEVE that Sophie's GREAT GRANDPARENTS ARE HERE....TOM AND INA WALKER. Wonderful. How blessed Sophie is! Invite Tom and Dana....Susan and Patrick to join me here at the Baptismal Font.

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, October 30, 1994

GREETING It's always a very special Sunday for us all when the children of our Church....the boys and girls of our Sunday School...join us down here for a few moments.

We greet them. They're going to sing an anthem for us while they're here...and our thanks to Julie Klein for all she does in helping us to have a Children's Choir. But before they sing we're going to have a baptism...and celebrate the baptism of SOPHIE MARGUERITE KEANE....

Some of you were baptized here in a service like this "not too long ago"....and it won't be too long before SOPHIE is sitting here with the rest of you on a Sunday morning.

BEFORE THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Before the share in this special moment of Baptism, let me remind the boys and girls of several things....

FIRST: Tomorrow night is Halloween, right.... and this afternoon, here at the church, at what time....four o'clock...to help you "get in the mood", we're having a Harvest Party...Karl...anything you would like to say in connection with it...

SECOND: Next Sunday Julie and Gary Klein will be here at 10:30 to lead us all - adults and children...in a pre-church HYMN SING.... third floor. Hope you'll remember and come early....

THIRD: I like this Sunday...not just because we all get an extra hour of sleep...but because we get to sing MARTIN LUTHER'S great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"....it reminds us that on October 31st, 1517...Martin Luther did something that brought new life into the church of his day. We call this Sunday REFORMATION SUNDAY....those with Lutheran church ties and background - like Mrs. Delson....Barbara Landon...will tell you what he did....95 These posted on a church door.

MOVE ON But let's move on now to the baptism of SOPHIE MARGUERITE KEANE... How blessed she is....not only her parents TOM AND DANA KEANE are here...but also GOD PARENTS....SUSAN BOND (Dana's sister) and PATRICK KEANE (Tom's cousin)....and GRANDPARENTS ARE HERE....Tom's mother, Patricia Keane, Dana's parents; Dave and Kaye Walker...and WOULD YOU BELIEVE that Sophie's GREAT GRANDPARENTS ARE HERE....TOM AND INA WALKER. Wonderful. How blessed Sophie is! Invite Tom and Dana....Susan and Patrick to join me here at the Baptismal F

"HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 30, 1994

"HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN?"

INTRODUCTION

A fifth grader is reported to have asked his Sunday School teacher,

"Where is heaven? How do we get there?"

Before the Sunday School teacher could come up with an answer to this heavy question, another eleven year old began to address the class of eight boys and three girls in response to the question of the hour. Said he; then,

"That's easy. The way you get to heaven is to go to the North Pole, put it in neutral and then go straight up....that will get you to heaven!"

Well, that's one way to get there...according to the generation brought up on Star Trek. But just so there's no misunderstanding, however, let me rephrase the question: how are you going to get into heaven once you arrive at the "pearly gates?" This was a bit of a concern for Martin Luther, too, for some may recall that he did something on October 31st, 1517 that led to what is called the Protestant Reformation.

DEVELOPMENT

Calvin (not John Calvin), but Calvin of the popular cartoon strip of Calvin and Hobbes is pictured lying beneath a tree. He says to Hobbes,

"What if there is no after-life? Just suppose that this is all we get?" Hobbes replies, "Oh, what the heck. I'll take it anyway...." Calvin responds, "Yeah...but if I'm not going to be eventually rewarded for my behavior, then I'd like to know NOW!"

How do we get to heaven? You may feel like the sour old guy who felt that too many people as it is get into heaven in the first place....which reminds me of something that happened during the installation of new lighting inside Liverpool Cathedral not too long ago. It seems that an electrician working in the roof space accidentally left the elevator door open. This prevented the electrician from returning to the ground floor. Visitors were somewhat stunned and shocked to see the Clerk of Works for the Cathedral standing in the middle of the cathedral crossing, yelling heavenward,

"Peter...Peter...close the gates, now!"

HOW DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN

How do you get to heaven? And what does it take?

The Russian Czar, Ivan the Terrible, tortured thousands of citizens. And he indulged in long drunken periods and had seven wives. After each wild affair, Ivan would atone by prostrating himself in front of the high altar of the church with such sincerity that he would bruise his forehead from hitting the stone floor of the church.

Even as a child, Ivan was cruel. He would amuse himself by throwing cats

and dogs off the roof of the Kremlin. And when it was rumored that the city of Novgorod was planning to defect to neighboring Lithuania, Ivan exterminated the city, torturing its citizens for five weeks and killed 60,000 people. In one fit of anger it was reported that he even struck his 27 year-old son in the head with an iron staff, killing him.

On March the 18th, 1584, Ivan died. And following the custom of Russian rulers, it was declared he died a monk. His head was shorn like that of a monk and he was buried in the robes of a monk. It was fully expected that God would be fooled and Ivan would enter heaven with the status of a humble monk.

How do you get to heaven? If you and I had lived back there in the 16th century, we might have been able to buy our way into those pearly gates. And even more startling, we could have bought passage for someone else who had already died. At least that was the impression that many of the common folk had when they purchased indulgences from the representatives of the official church.

This was a perversion of the real purpose of the indulgence, but it was a perversion that is easily understood. The sale of indulgences was a way of raising funds for the church while dealing with the subject of penance. I doubt if there were any yearly financial canvasses. The church's attitude was that even though sin is forgiven, it must still be paid for in the form of penance either through good works in this world or in purgatory in the next. An indulgence simply allowed you to avoid penance by substituting a monetary payment. Or, you could "spring" a loved one from purgatory in the same way.

Those of you who are students of church history will recall that it was such abuses such as this that caused a young priest by the name of Martin Luther, a professor in the University of Wittenberg, to nail up and to post his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. He had been devastated by the corruption he had found in Rome on an earlier visit. And feeling himself to be sinful and rebellious, he made his way to the cathedral and began climbing the Scala Sancta, the "sacred stairs". As he climbed the stairs, he knelt and kissed each step as was the custom. Suddenly a verse of Scripture began haunting him,

"The just shall live by faith!"

And in that moment, it occurred to him that salvation came not through kissing steps, but through one's faith in Christ. Christ's death on the cross was sufficient to cover all his sins. He came to see penance as an "add-on". To him it was not something integral to the faith.

And Martin Luther was simply "re-discovering" something that St. Paul had discovered some 1500 years earlier, for Paul had struggled with a very similar question. What was the relationship of the new Christian faith to the Jewish faith from which it sprung and especially to Jewish Law. For the First Century Jews, the Law was the "Key" to salvation. Keep the Law and you will be acceptable to God. But what happens when you break the Law as everyone is apt to do...sooner or later.

Jews made animal sacrifices to atone for the breaking of the Law. Small sins or modest incomes meant at least a turtledove must be sacrificed, or possibly a lamb. Large sins or greater wealth demanded a bull be sacrificed.

There were different classes of sacrifices that required different kinds of offerings. For instance,

"OLAH was a burnt offering. MINHA was a cereal offering. SELAMIN was a peace of fellowship offering. ASSAM was a guilt offering, while HATTATH was a sin offering."

The guilt offering was mandatory. It required not only an expensive burnt offering - a ran or unblemished lamb - but full restitution of any value deprived of another because of the sin, PLUS a twenty percent penalty given to the offended one.

You begin to see that this was a time-honored way of dealing with sin. It was also an unnecessary one. It's important for us to see this. Paul wanted the early Christians to understand that Jesus was "God's sacrifice" upon the altar of the cross. He atoned for the sins of all. There is nothing else we need to do. Christ has paid it all. He called it justification by faith.

And justification by our faith is really a radical doctrine, if you stop to think about it. Luther went back to Paul's letter to the Romans to find it and find it he did. ~~And that's why October 31st, 1517 is an important date in church history.~~ And many of us in our heart of hearts have a difficult time accepting it. Why...one may wonder....

WE LIKE TO SEE PEOPLE PAY FOR THEIR SINS

For one thing, we like to see people pay for their sins.

This is at the heart of the debate over capital punishment, or so it seems.

Just about the first question that arose out of the tragic O. J. Simpson case this summer was,

"If O. J. is guilty...will they ask for the death penalty?"

Could America stand the thought of a man like OJ Simpson being strapped into an electric chair or taken into the gas chamber? It is one thing to think of some unknown and faceless man on death row being put to death for a crime, but many of us grew up cheering for OJ. He is a handsome man...articulate...and yet, we like to see people pay for their sins...don't we?

And, if the truth be known, many of us would like to pay for our own sins. Ah, wouldn't it be great if we could simply go into the temple and offer up a sacrifice to pay for all our sins? Or, to travel to Rome and kiss those sacred steps and know that our sins have thus been "atoned" for. We'd feel better. Psychologically, that would be a terrific option, wouldn't it?

Kenneth Chafin once said that when he was a young minister he thought his most difficult task was to "convict" people of sin, but later on, he came to realize that it was more difficult to convince them that God really loved them the way they are! He can accept them as being worthy without approving of their sins. They can come into His presence without any pretense, without any smoke screen, without any veneer, and find love, find acceptance, find forgiveness and experience cleansing and hope and new life.

It really is difficult once you have sinned to actually feel forgiven by God. It seems far too easy to simply ask for forgiveness and believe it will be granted. Many would like to have some kind of prescribed penance.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH SPEAKS OF GOD'S CHARACTER

But here is what we need to see and take

in. Justification by faith is saying something to us about the very nature of God, something about His or Her character.

In the May issue of Guideposts magazine, Fulton Ousler, Jr., told a beautiful story that I believe is appropriate here. Young Ousler was only 19 when his father died. He had worked closely with his father in the last years of his life. Often times at night, and on weekends and through four summer vacations, he typed....did research or stood beside his father's desk as he wrote. After much reckless searching, his father had found faith late on in his life, and young Ousler was privileged to share in his work on magazine stories....articles of faith he called them and his efforts to complete the trilogy that had begun with The Greatest Story Ever Told.

Young Ousler had been responsible for his father's library. And he took pride in knowing the exact location of his many, many books and more than 200 personal notes. And so after his father's death, when he went through the things in his father's bedside table drawer, he was astonished to come across a small spiral notebook he had never seen before. As he flipped through it, he saw that the pages consisted of nothing but names....names carefully handwritten in his favorite green ink. First, there were family names. Next came the names of friends, and he saw that his father had included the dead as well as the living. Then there was a blank page, followed by a list of perhaps 20 names, many of which the younger man did not recognize.

He showed the small spiral black notebook to his mother and she said to him,

"Oh....that was his prayer book....every night, before he turned out the light he would open that book, put his finger on each name and prayed in silence." "But who are these?" asked the young Ousler, pointing to the final list. She said, "They were people who had hurt him."

He had been praying for people who had hurt him. I guess we would call that forgiveness. It seems to be a virtue that only few of us are capable of. "I'll forgive" we may say, "But believe me....I won't forget". I think it takes a very special kind of person to forgive so completely.

GOD OFFERS PERFECT FORGIVENESS

But here is the important truth for this Reformation Day message. God, who is perfect, offers perfect forgiveness. When God says we are forgiven, we are forgiven. If it makes you feel better to do some kind of penance for your sin, fine! But understand that it is for your benefit - not God's.

I can say to you, as a representative of God, that you are forgiven...not because of who you are, but because of who God is and what Christ has done on our behalf.

WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE

What is your response to this? To go out and sin again? Put it in human terms. Suppose you had hurt your earthly father or mother very deeply, or your wife or your husband, or even your children....but out of their reservoir of love for you they had forgiven you. Would you go out to hurt them again? I should like to think you would not. Only the most corrupt people keep hurting someone who has forgiven them so completely. This is the motivation for right living, NOT because we fear God, but because we respect such love and such forgiveness, and such character that we are drawn up, lifted up and seek to live with that kind of character ourselves.

Said Paul, "The just shall live by faith".

CLOSING

Somebody once said that Columbus discovered a new world, that Copernicus discovered a new heaven, and Luther discovered a new God - a God gracious for the sake of the work of Christ. They all lived at the same time. Their lives overlapped. Justification by faith is just a theological way of expressing a very simple truth, "God loves us completely. God forgives us completely".

Let us go forth on this special reformation Sunday; let us depart with that love and that forgiveness in our hearts.

PRAYER

Deepen our trust and increase our faith in You, O God, who has come to us in Christ. Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in this church, this hour, this day and confirm within us the feelings, the decisions, the resolutions of this hour spent in Your presence. Let us accept your love and your forgiveness in our lives. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.