

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
Reformation 2025
Grace, River Forest
10/26/2025

No Strings Attached

Whenever I think of risk my imagination always goes back to middle school dances. There are the people who seem to be *free* to let the music move them. Laugh and enjoy. In the thick of it. And others who seem to have stuck themselves to the wall. No matter how old you are-- it takes risk, or faith to get out there. I never went to high school dances but I bet it is the same. I was too wrapped up in myself to ever go. Wound tight. Stuck. My inner monologue was loud. Like a blasting, bumping bass beat that drowns out everything else. What if they don't accept me? What if they find out who I really am? I know I'm different-- is that, or will that ever be okay? Am I good enough? Let's be honest, after all today is about truth. Do those voices ever really mute themselves or do they just take on a different, more sophisticated tone, as we grow older? I think I know the answer.

We are here today around these texts and these hymns partially, because someone took a risk five hundred years ago. Stepped out beyond the confines of what he knew, out into an unknown future because he had heard for himself a melody that finally moved him. It was his discovery of what had always been true: the righteous shall live by faith.

Even though I grew up singing the more march-like tune for A Mighty Fortress, the rhythmic one that we sing at Grace has grown on me. Juxtaposed with the other one it sounds less rigid and more dance-like.

Faith and risk go together. In the life of God's people often they can be synonyms. To live by faith is to live openly and to risk for the sake of others because the definitive word about your life has already been spoken. So we are going to practice. Take a risk. There is no better day to try something new than on Reformation Sunday. Ready? Turn to your neighbor and say- more dance, less march.

We've all stumbled into people who were free. They know who they are. People that live out of a depth that makes you stop and marvel. They *own* it. They are in the thick of it. It is inspiring but it also might make us uncomfortable. Their risk seems unwise. We, who are so used to being calculated with our carefully cultivated images.

There is so much that keeps us in *bondage*. Stuck to the proverbial wall. The loops that play in our heads that go to our hearts. Our own curved inwardness. The perpetual pull to please others. We've gone our own way a thousand times. Despite our failed attempts to justify ourselves through works of the law-- God persists.

The truth is that we are not unlike those in Jerimiah's time and those with selective amnesia in John. That did not stop God then and does not now. In our faithlessness God is faithful. This new covenant that God has given cannot be broken like the stone tablets on Saiani, it is written on our very flesh. Etched on your forehead in baptism. Sealed by the broken body of God's own son. Nothing and no-one can erase or break apart this promise. Today we revel in the truth that God saves sinners singlehandedly. Pure gift from start to finish. You are forgiven. You are found in Jesus Christ and so God will never lose you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Even if you wander off, God will never lose you. You are made right before God because of someone else's work entirely. That's the truth.

In the end we turn to our neighbors. Not just in this assembly, but out there. In the thick of it. That's all there is left to do. The vertical is taken care of. You and God are good. If you are baptized then the life of the triune God belongs to you with no strings attached. This love that has come to you will never turn away.

If the vertical is taken care of, the horizontal remains. You are free to stop looking with anxious striving, heavenward. God is down here. Saving you and setting you free. Free to look neighborward around every corner.

Luther himself wrote, "We should be guided in *all* our works by this one thought alone- that we may serve and benefit others in everything that is done, having nothing else before our eyes except the need and advantage of the neighbor."

The radical Lutheran insight is a direct repudiation of white Christian nationalism. God gives God's love to all freely. Without distinction, as Paul said. Our response is to seek the welfare of our neighbors. Without distinction.

We are Lutherans after all. A global theological movement of immigrants, people on the way, rooted in the God who always comes down to us in our own heart language. Isn't that the core of it? What else would we do with this newfound freedom? Work for the well-being of someone else entirely.

Join the dance. Step: in public. It's not rigid. It's rhythmic, joyful, liberating, inviting, world turning. Its moves open us up and create space for others at the same time. A witness to what God is up to today. It's worth the risk. After all, the righteous shall live— by faith.

