

Reformation Sunday-October 29, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Romans 3:19-28 and John 8:31-36

“But Now”, Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen

As we heard in the first lesson for today, God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah and declared, “The days are surely coming when I will make a covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that he made with their ancestors when he took them by the hand out of the land of Egypt—a covenant which they broke.” Some things haven’t changed since these words were first spoken. We, like God’s first chosen people, still break the first covenant, the ten commandments that Moses received from the Lord. But unlike when these words were spoken, the time of waiting for the new law is over. We no longer live by the law of Moses, but now we live by the law of faith. We live by faith in Jesus Christ who no longer is waited for, but who is with us today.

How much clearer could Paul be in the words that we heard from Romans that he received directly from Jesus Christ? Paul declared, No **one** will be justified by deeds prescribed by the first law. No one. There is **no** distinction between any of us based on the good we have done here on earth to receive our eternal reward. This is why in the parable of the wedding feast; the master told his slaves to go out into the streets and invite the good and the bad. Entrance into heaven is not given based on what we do. There is no distinction between any one of us. None. Paul continues, for **all** have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. All. Because of this what has changed? **NOW** we are justified by grace as a gift. But don’t we have to do at least a little something with this gift? Don’t we have to receive it or at least not reject it? Sorry, those words are words that we have made up. They are not the words that Jesus gave Paul to preach or for you to hear. Still, we want to believe, on judgment day, that the first words of Jesus that you will hear are, “Well done, good and faithful servant enter into the joy of the Lord?” And doesn’t this reading from Romans begin by talking about our accountability with God? If so, there must be a ledger kept of your good deeds on one side compared to where you have fallen short on the other column so you have some evidence to defend yourself why you should enter the joy of the Lord.

It is so crystal clear from these words of Paul that judgment day will not be a day of boasting about what we have done. Our boasting will only be about what Jesus Christ has done for us. For we are justified not by works prescribed by the law. We are justified by a new law, the law of faith, which is separate, apart from works prescribed by the law. It seems so clear, but we want salvation to have something to do with us. I remember in a class in seminary that was made up of students from several different denominations and we had just heard these words of Paul from Romans preached to us. After class, he and I were washing our hands in the bathroom and he looked at me and said, “It’s all about our obedience to the law.” I thought to myself, “Where were you?” If it is about our obedience, it is about our obedience to the gospel which was the wonderful wording I found on Ella Riswold’s confirmation certificate this week. Obedience to the law and obedience to the gospel are not the same.

The law of the first covenant is not like the new law, the gospel. The law, the things we do, is not separated by a fuzzy line or a gray area that transitions in the gospel which is what Jesus has done for us. Jesus didn’t use the ten commandments as a template and reworked them so that they would be easier for

you and me to keep compared to his first chosen people. Jesus did not come down in the flesh to become a better leader than Moses was so that we would be more likely to follow the Ten Commandments. Verse 20 from Romans is often glossed over or outright ignored. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. Period. But then, after we realize that, doesn't the law make us better people? Paul puts this false assumption to rest in Chapter 5 of Romans when he said, "But when the law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." More laws only revealed that we keep fewer laws. Our sins are not reduced because of the law, they are multiplied. Therefore, the only solution to our sin is not more law, but to be justified apart from the law with forgiveness.

As clear as this teaching from Jesus is, it has always been doubted and rejected. As we remember, Martin Luther today on Reformation Sunday, he did not believe this teaching at first either. He was just like Paul who fully believed that if he only worked harder, the Lord couldn't help but love him more. But Luther and Paul never felt a moment of freedom by all their efforts to please God. The more they worked, the heavier the chains of their slavery fell on them.

It wasn't until Paul was struck blind by the Lord on the road to Damascus that he knew that there was nothing he could do to save himself. It wasn't until Luther read these words from Paul that it is the righteousness **of God** that saves you. Not **your** righteousness.

When these words, the righteousness of God, were revealed to Luther, his life and preaching changed forever. Luther was no longer a slave to sin but had been set free by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther is most often remembered by his 95 theses that were nailed to the Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31, 1517, but far more important was his writing called the Freedom of a Christian. It began with these words.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." How can you be a free Lord and a dutiful servant at the same time?

Jesus not only gives us the answer to this question, but Jesus himself is the answer to this question given in our gospel reading for today. The Jews that heard Jesus talk about being set free told Jesus that they had never been slaves to anyone. If you trace God's chosen people through the Old Testament, they spent more time as slaves than in freedom. Yet they told Jesus that they have never been slaves. Getting across the Red Sea and being released from the Egyptians only led them into slavery by their next overlords. Their denial to slavery to Jesus would be as ridiculous as our denial that we are not slaves to sin. That is, if we think we have within us the power to choose good from evil. It is not our good choices that will set us free, but it is the truth. And this truth is not found in a doctrine or writing of the church. The truth is a person. The truth that sets us free is Jesus Christ who said, I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me. Again, NO ONE. Not even that wedding crasher that we heard about in the parable of the wedding feast a couple weeks ago that thought he could disguise himself with his good works without being clothed in the righteousness given to him by the king.

If the first function of the law is to give to each of us the knowledge that we are sinners, where does that leave us? Are we stuck as slaves? We are until we hear and have faith alone in the promise that our sinfulness is removed from us as far as the east is from the west. Our balance sheet of sins is wiped clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. Only then are we set free.

And when we believe we are saved by faith alone, we will no longer look to ourselves. We will become a perfectly free Lord to everyone, and in that newfound freedom we will be dutiful servants to every one of our neighbors.

You have now been set free to go in peace and serve your neighbors. Amen