

Advent Evening Service, year "B". The scripture text is taken from Romans 3:21-26

As the year 2017 comes to a close, does the Reformation which started in Germany 500 years ago still matter? Do we still need a day every year (October 31st) to remind us of the Reformation?

Did you know, that a recent poll showed that over half of American Protestants didn't even know that Martin Luther's writings and actions inspired the Reformation?

So for us as Lutherans, if Reformation Day only celebrated Lutheranism, then it shouldn't matter.

If Reformation Day only celebrated the pride we have in being Lutherans, then it shouldn't matter.

But the Reformation is about the truth that Martin Luther dusted off in all its shining glory, hidden by centuries of faulty doctrines, and outright lies, then the Reformation does matter.

The Reformation still matters in at least three ways. First. The Reformation matters because confessing the truth, matters. Second. The Reformation matters, because hearing the truth matters. And Third. The Reformation matters, because believing the truth matters.

So tonight, we are going to go, to the basic truth of the Christian Faith, because it matters, it matters to me and it matters to you.

It mattered to those who have gone before us, it matters to us today, and it will matter to future generations of not only Lutheran Christians, but other Christians as well.

So tonight, we are going to look at the doctrine of "Justification, by grace through faith", one of the very basics of the truth, of eternal salvation, that is ours as a gift of God.

It was the basic truth that our Lord Jesus Christ proclaimed, when He said in John's Gospel, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5, verse 24)

Jesus tells us the basic truth, that faith comes by hearing. So we hear God's Holy Word, and faith is planted in the heart.

Faith grows by hearing, and we believe. We walk in that Christian faith. Jesus says we even cross over from death to life.

That is the basic truth. Faith comes by hearing and is a gift of God. By God's grace through faith, we are saved, we have eternal life. The Apostle Paul adds that, God's righteousness is ours, which is something we know and believe from early on.

This was something that Martin Luther struggled with in his life. You see, if we could have lived in western Europe in Luther's Day, this wasn't just in Germany, but across Europe, the thinking of the Roman Catholic Church was, that this passage of scripture, (taken from Paul's Letter to the Romans) is that, the salvation we have in Jesus Christ, "does not" make us righteous before God. And here is why:

It only puts us in a position to become "righteous". The righteousness of Christ is distributed by the church, like talents.

It is up to us to increase those talents by good works. And those good works include such things as viewing sacred relics of the church, making pilgrimages to Rome, giving money to the Church, or giving property to the Church, or buying “indulgences”, and/or a combination of the above and it goes on, and on, and on.

Then at the final judgment, God will decide if the faithful have used their talents sufficiently, If they have, then the faithful will receive eternal life, if not, they will go to hell.

A number of years ago, I saw painting, done in Luther’s Day, it was done like that of a pen and ink drawing of Christ sitting on the throne; on one side of His head was a sword, and the other side of His head was a lily, the burning question of the day was, “How do I avoid that sword, and earn that lily?”

You see, that was the Christianity that Luther first learned, that the salvation God gives us in Jesus Christ, is not so much the salvation, that God gives us in Jesus Christ, as a free gift. Here is the catch, you have to earn it.

What Christ accomplished for us, was the removal of Original Sin as a permanent barrier to salvation.

Once Original Sin is removed, it is then up to us, to work out our own salvation by obeying the church, and performing good works, which are pleasing to God.

So what was completely new for Luther as he struggled with the scriptures and the faith, was the discovery, that salvation is not merely the “potential for salvation”, but is truly salvation here and now.

Our salvation is in Jesus Christ, and Christ alone. Salvation is based on the merits of Christ, It is not based on our good works, or our achievements, or our merits, because if it were based on us, we would fail miserably. Furthermore, our “good works” are a result of our salvation, that we have received through God’s grace, thanks to Christ.

*So now let’s look at our text from Paul’s Letter to the Roman Church. Please turn in your Bible to the Book of Romans, go to chapter 3, starting at verse 19. The Apostle Paul wanted to make the point that no one is saved by the law.

Listen to verse 19: (Follow along with me as I read). “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”

Sin silences people. When we heard the story from the Book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, what happened, they tried to hide themselves from God, they were scared to talk to God. Sin silenced them.

Even when God asked them where they were, they were hiding. Sin silenced their perfect understanding of God’s Word. God’s law, now made them accountable to God. Sin still does that today.

God’s perfect law, points out sin, and not the Savior. Now let’s look at verse 20: (Follow along with me as I read). “For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law, comes the knowledge of sin”.

During the time of Jesus, there were scribes and the Pharisees, the gate keepers of the Jewish Faith and the community so to speak.

So what did the scribes and the Pharisees teach? They said, “Do this or do that, don’t do this or don’t do that”, and God will find favor with you.

The fact is that they started with the Ten Commandments and added books and even more books of laws (some 613 of them) that the people were to follow.

So my question would be, “If there are 613 rules to follow, what is the Standard to meet in which one gets a pass?” Or, how many laws can you break and yet still make it into heaven?

It was important for this simple message that no one is saved by observing the law. Back to the basics, the law shows us our sin.

The law showed Adam and Eve their sin. The law shows every sinner, every sin and still does to this very day.

That is the point that the Apostle Paul makes. The law reveals sin. Because of that, the Apostle Paul says in verse 23 (Follow along with me as I read it): “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The Apostle Paul wants to make it very clear, that there were not only a few that have sinned, not some, not many, but that all have sinned and all have missed the mark. All people on this earth are unrighteous. Everyone is guilty of sin, no one is exempt.

Now let’s look at verse 26 (Follow along with me as I read it): “It was to prove at the present time, that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

In other words, a person, is justified by faith apart from observing (keeping the law). Back to the basics, the law cannot save. The law shows us our sin.

By observing the law, we cannot work or earn our way into heaven. First of all, admitting that there is sin and that law holds us accountable, is something people do not want to hear.

Our sinful nature does not want to hear that, but God says, “You are a sinner!” The Bible tells us, that we all fall short of the glory of God. There is no difference among any of us.

Inside of the church or outside of the church, believers and unbelievers, we’re all in the same boat. All have sinned!

So what else happens today? We know that in today’s society, some try to explain away sin by calling it a sickness or a disease. You know, so and so can’t help it, he or she is just a product of their upbringing or their environment.

Worst of all, in our day and age, people honestly think, that if they try hard enough, and live a good life (So define the Standard for living a good life), what is the standard that will be good enough for God so that we get a free pass into heaven?

Or, God will never be upset with those who at least try. Maybe, sometimes, we feel like that. After all, all of us, feel good when we do something good.

Sometimes, we fall into that trap and say, “You know, I am not such a bad person, after all, I am not like those people in prison, I have not committed any crimes, I obey the law, I pay my bills and I do the right thing, besides, I live a good life, I’ve paid my dues, God understands”.

But now, let’s go back to the truth, what does the scripture say? Turn in your Bible to the Book of James, chapter 2, starting at verse 10. The writer of the Book of James tells us very clearly: “For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it”.

It is not only what we do against God’s law that would condemn us. One wrong thing, makes us guilty of breaking all the Ten Commandments.

In God’s eye, sin is sin. No big ones, no little ones, sin is sin. And, by the way, the good that we do not do towards our neighbor is also a sin.

And that is not even the worst part of it. Sin infects us, and affects us, each and everyone. Sin, isn’t just something we do wrong from time to time, here and there, it isn’t just something we do against our neighbor, from time to time or here and there.

God reminds us, that we sin against Him in our actions, our words, our deeds and even in our thoughts.

That is where everything begins, inside of us. Inside of us, we have the human heart that we were born with, that is darkened with sin and is evil.

Now let’s turn in our Bible to Mark’s Gospel, chapter 7, starting at verse 21. Jesus said: “For it is within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and they defile a person.”

After you read this, you almost have to come up for air to get through this whole list. Jesus said this because the Pharisees were saying: “Look at all the good things we self-righteous people do, and by the way, aren’t our prayers that we pray for everybody to hear, aren’t they just wonderful, God must be so happy!

Jesus was reminding them, that it was not the outside that He was concerned about, but rather, it was the inside where evil dwells.

The law cannot save us. God’s righteousness does not come to us by the law. God’s righteousness reveals to us that He is a righteous judge.

That was the struggle of Martin Luther. As a young man, Luther went to school, studied and plan to become a lawyer. But God had other plans for Luther.

As a young man Luther was almost struck by lightning, and vowed to become a monk. So Luther dedicated himself to become a monk.

As Luther began his life as a monk, Luther found that his sins troubled him, Luther did everything that the church required of him to do: prayer, fasting, sleep deprivation, self-inflicted punishment, Luther even crawled up the steps of St. Peter’s Church in Rome.

Still, Luther's sins bothered him. Luther only saw God as a righteous judge, who hated him, and who saw him as an unrighteous person filled with sin.

No matter how hard he tried, Luther could not find any satisfaction in trying to save himself by doing deeds of the law.

God has opened our eyes to realize the same thing. Solely by God's law we all stand condemned before God.

So what does the scripture tell us? Turn in your Bible to the Book of Isaiah, chapter 64, verse 6. Follow along with me as I read the text. The prophet writes: "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Did you catch that? God says that even those things that we think are so good, (righteous acts) are like filthy rags.

On this side of heaven, you and I have sin which clings to us. Our sins cling to our very thoughts, words, and actions. This is the total depravity of mankind, inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve.

Sin, continues in our own lives by our own willful disobedience against God. Yet in spite of our wretched condition and our contemptible actions, wicked words, and evil thoughts, God's Righteousness is ours.

Here is the sweet message of the Gospel. The law reminds us that we cannot save ourselves or buy or earn our way into heaven.

Yet, God gives us eternity to us, doesn't He? We are saved by God's grace through faith. Please turn in our Bible to Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verse 21. Follow along with me as I read. "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets."

It was not a new message that Paul was preaching here. It really wasn't a new message that Jesus came to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was near, repent and believe the good news.

The gospel message was a message that was talked about in the law and the prophets. These were the scriptures the early believers had, the Psalms, the Prophets, and the first five books of the Bible.

They also pointed to the Savior. These books of God also reminded the believers that they were sinful, but there was a Savior who was to come, who would forgive their sins.

Even though some thought that the gospel was a new and different message, it really wasn't. This happened during the time of Luther.

God's word had been hidden for so long that when Luther preached from the Bible, people came and listened.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, that the righteousness from God, comes through faith in Christ.

The people who were saved, weren't just the Jewish nation anymore. They were the Jews and Gentiles alike. For all who believe, it made no difference whether they were the physical descendants of Abraham or not.

Now the believers who believed in Christ, were considered the children of Abraham. They received God's righteousness through faith.

Paul rejoiced, because by faith, which God gave to him, God's righteousness became his.

Now let's look at verse 26. (Please look in your Bible and follow along as I read from chapter 3, verse 26 in Paul's Letter to the Romans). "It was to prove at the present time, that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."

Here is God, the righteous judge sitting on the throne, and He looks at human kind, as human kind has destroyed the world through our sins, yet God is a righteous judge who has all the power in the world to condemn us and wipe us off the face of the earth.

Yet, God's justice is forgiveness. No charges, no penalty, no sentence, and no punishment. That is God who is being just, and God's righteousness is ours by grace through faith.

Now let's look at verse 27, follow along with me as I read: "Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith."

Believers believe because God has put faith in their hearts. Believers believe, because of the work of God's Holy Spirit, that has caused the Word of God, which was planted in the hearts of people everywhere to grow, and become faith.

Paul continues in verse 28 by saying: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." Back to the basics.

As I close out the message for tonight, Remember, we are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus, which we find the scriptures alone, by faith alone, and by grace alone Period!

We don't decide to go and find Christ on our own, and take Him as Lord and Savior on our own. This decision and choosing is contrary to our sinful nature.

We are born into this sinful and fallen world as enemies of God. God has to change us and He does through the power of His Holy Word, and the blessed sacraments, through baptism, the washing of the water and His Holy Word, through the Lord's supper, through the Body of Christ given for you, through the blood of Christ, shed for you.

God loves you, and He loves you, and He saves us by His grace. It is a free gift. Therefore we are to be thankful. If it was our decision, then we would boast, by saying: "I believe because I have tried harder than you, or I believe because I chose Christ and you didn't. Does that make sense?"

It has been my hope tonight, that as you have heard this message, that you have come to realize, that no matter how good we think we are, or strive to be, no matter how much we attend church, no matter how much we pray, no matter how much we mess things up, and then strive to be good, to make up for our failures, and shortcomings, and to do good things, we cannot by our works, our even good intentions, or by our merits earn our way into heaven. We obtain heaven by faith in

Christ Jesus Son of the living God, who died on that cross for you, so that your sins would be forgiven, and on the third day God raised Him from the dead, so that heaven would be our home, now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, You are a God of love and mercy, even though we are so sinful and deserve nothing but your wrath and condemnation. By your grace and your grace alone you have saved us from sin and death, through the merits of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. By faith in You, we will stand in your righteousness, as a gift, washed in the blood of Christ and wrapped in His garment of salvation. All these things we humbly pray, in Jesus Christ's most precious and holy name. AMEN.