**Romans 3:19-28** November 3, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Reformation Sunday

*19Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

*21But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — 26he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

*27Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“We Maintain that a Man Is Justified by Faith  
apart from Observing the Law!”**

What is your all-time favorite movie? What movie have you watched three or four times, or more, and you still get excited about seeing it again. Is it the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? How about a comedy with a good storyline, like that classic *The Princess Bride*? Or maybe an action movie. *Avengers: Endgame*?

Now take your favorite movie of all time and compare it to reading a dictionary. Not looking up a word in a dictionary, but reading a dictionary. “A”: a, aam, aardvark, aardwolf, abaica, abacinate, abacination… or watching *Avengers: Endgame*. Which sounds like more fun to you?

In our second reading, you may have felt like the dictionary option got dropped on to you. You started attentively listening to the Epistle reading, the one from Romans. Then it came to the word righteous, then grace, then redemption, then atonement, then justification and your mind became confused by all the religious terminology and finally shut down. You just couldn’t grapple with all the strange words. Today’s reading almost sounds like the Apostle Paul swallowed a dictionary. Even to somebody like me who thinks in pastor talk, this is over the top! My guess—just a guess—is that these ten verses have more religious lingo than any other ten verses of the Bible.

Why do that? Even if it is in the Bible, why read something sounding like a religious dictionary on Sunday morning? Because it is Reformation Sunday! One way of looking at Reformation Day is to think of it as going back to the dictionary to be sure that our faith is correctly defined. If there is one thing you notice these days, it is that everything is getting redefined. Marriage: redefined. What is a felony and what a misdemeanor: redefined. We talk about redefining literacy, leadership and luxury.

But some things had better not change. Two plus two equals four, and no one wants the re-designers of the Boeing 737 SuperMax to do their math any other way. Some truths can’t change, and that is a good thing. Reformation reminds us of that.

Reformation is about stripping away all the ways that we have redefined God’s truth. It tells us to go back to the source. That is what Reformation was about and is about. That is what is happening in our reading. Going to the original definitions.

One frequent misinterpretation of the Reformation is to make it a rallying cry for individualism, for doing things my way. Martin Luther’s much repeated words to the powers of his day, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise” are often championed as a guy who gave a bloody nose to the establishment.

But Martin Luther was no anti-establishment man. He prefaced his comment “Here I stand” by saying, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He was not an individual resolutely setting out on his own. He had tethered all his search for religious truth to God’s Word. And if he were to come untethered from that, if he were to strike out on his own, he said it would be like a astronaut space walk with a bad ending. In a sense, we should think of Martin Luther as the ultimate conformist. He returned to the dictionary definition of the words of God.

For him, the opening chapters of Romans were most important because in these chapters his personal reformation occurred. The phrase that changed everything for him was a phrase in our reading, ***“the righteousness of God.”***

For the first thirty years of his life, Martin Luther was always hearing about “the righteousness of God.” Whenever “the righteousness of God” was mentioned, he cowered in fear. He had been taught to think of a holy God who is infernally angry and continually punishes the unholiness of mankind. In his many years of religious schooling, Luther had heard this often. He had been taught and conditioned to recoil in fear when he heard about “the righteousness of God.”

But because he was a professor of the Scriptures he studied the Scriptures. In his studying, he came to the book of Romans and realized that the church of his day had completely mis-defined God’s words with human ideas. In a sense they taught that two plus two equals five. They taught that the “righteousness of God” only means God is angry with you, and you had better straighten up, and you had better make up your sins.

But Luther came to places like our reading and he couldn’t reconcile what God’s word said with what he had been taught. Where it says, ***“This righteousness [of][[2]](#footnote-2) God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe”*** he heard something new. For the first time in his life, he learned the correct definition of the words, “the righteousness of God.” It was not God’s punishing, crushing wrath, but “the righteousness of God” was something that God freely gave to him through faith, through simply accepting and relying on Jesus Christ. Speaking of that moment he said, “I felt as if I… had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Letting the Bible define itself completely redefined his faith, his relationship with God. This was not about Luther individually finding a better form of spirituality, but about Martin Luther returning to what God had said 1,500 years earlier.

But enough about Martin Luther. Reformation is equally about the 21st century. We find that our surrounding religious world also is awash in falsely redefined truths religious ideas.

The most common and pernicious religious lie of our day is rampant spiritual individualism. People decide what “works for them.” They speak about “spirituality” as opposed to religion. What people mean is that they want their own imaginations to determine what they believe, rather than the word of God. The reasons are obvious: then they can dismiss what God says with a simple, “That doesn’t work for me.” To them, “faith” means “*I* think” or “*I* hope.” To the opposite, Romans 3:22 defines saving faith as ***“faith in Jesus Christ”*** and his work. That’s the only one that works.

To another popular modern heresy. Like the work-righteous framework that Martin Luther grew up in, modern spirituality is riddled with work righteousness. Get into a conversation with the average person who believes in God, sadly even with many Christians, and ask them why they think they are good with God. They will point out that they help those in trouble, that they are accepting of all people. Listen to how they define their acceptability to God. They have returned to the work righteousness that marks every single human religion. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, modern Judaism, secularism, paganism, every single religion in the world defines our moral acceptability in terms of what we do. In 21st century work righteousness everyone rides on the high horse of their imagined moral acceptability.

Verse 20 of our reading takes that imagined moral acceptability, throws it to the ground and crushes it like Humpty-Dumpty, declaring: ***“No one…no one… no one will be declared right in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”***

Then Romans three, carefully, with dictionary-like precision, defines how it is that we get right with God. “The righteousness of God—that is, true guiltlessness—comes through simply accepting the fact that Jesus is our Savior. It’s the same for everybody. Everybody has hopelessly offended God, *and* God has declared all these offensive people to be innocent. He does this as a gift because he wants to, because of the price that Christ Jesus paid. God made Christ Jesus a payment in our place to satisfy his morally correct disgust over our sins. Remember, this is through faith, through simply accepting that God has done this for us.” (my highly imperfect paraphrase of verses 22-25a)

Ah, but familiarity breeds contempt, or if not contempt at least boredom. These marvelous truths that energized Martin Luther have been repeated so often that I am boring to you. What to do?

…Perhaps you have heard of that classic, *Les Miserables.* Often rated as one of the all-time best novels, *Les Miserables*’s power is proven by the fact that every generation produces another film version of the story (most recently in 2012 winning three Academy Awards), every generation another Broadway musical version. It is a compelling story. Near the beginning you fall in with an ex-convict, out of prison only a few days. Starving and exhausted, no one in town will give the ex-con a place to sleep. Finally, a priest takes him in, feeds him, and lets him sleep in the vicarage, the first bed he has slept in for 19 years! The ex-con sleeps soundly till the middle of the night when he wakes and repays the priest’s kindness by stealing the most valuable items in the entire vicarage, six silver bowls and a ladle. He makes a getaway, only to be escorted back to the priest by the police at mid-day. They present the miserable, bedraggled man to the priest and say, “We have found this man in possession of these. He claims that you gave these to him as a gift.” There stand the police and the ex-con, rope holding up his pants for lack of a belt, barefoot, patches covering nearly every bit of what passed for his clothing, now doomed to spend the rest of his life in prison. “He claims that you gave these to him as a gift.” Without blinking an eye the priest says, “I did.” The police are dumb-founded. But do you know who is most surprised of all? Jean Valjean, the ex-con. He knew that he had lied. He knew that he had stolen those things. He knew that he deserved to live out the rest of his days choking on quarry dust in a prison camp. But with a word, the priest has made him not guilty, and he is free. Not just free, but free to walk off with the priest’s most valuable possessions. He can’t believe it!

Let that amazement be yours! Reformation is about returning to the fact that when God tells you that you are forgiven, you ought to believe it, and *you* ought to be the most amazed person in the room. You know that you don’t deserve it. You can’t claim innocence. Of all people on the earth, you can name more of your own personal sins than any other’s. About yourself, not a day goes by when you do not remember something from your past. And while you may have made peace with God, you still remember it and carry the regret to the grave. About yourself, you never go a day without knowing that you have committed a sin. You know where you are lazy, when you are licentious, how you are mean-spirited. Your evil life is an open book to you.

When God justifies us, he declares us not guilty of all the evil we have in fact done. The one emotion we should feel even greater than our joy is surprise, because we *are not*, in fact,righteous. We are not guiltless. When we are forgiven we are involved in the greatest travesty of justice in human history. An innocent man, Jesus of Nazareth by name, was sentenced to die in our place. When I confessed my sins this morning, God forgave me! Can you believe it?

Reformation is a return to that fact and that feeling. Reformation is an assertion that we will not, indeed we cannot, change this message, verse 28:

**“We Maintain that a Man Is Justified by Faith  
apart from Observing the Law!”** Amen.

1. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “of” is the Greek, “from” is an acceptable translation, but less literal. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kittleson, ibid, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)