

The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.

Sermon for Reformation Sunday

The Text: Romans 3:19-28

As a pastor sat by the bedside of a dying parishioner, the dying man said “Don’t worry about me, get out there and do some work.” The pastor wondered “What is this work I must be doing if not sitting with my dying parishioners?”

What work or things do you think must happen for a Reformation celebration to be complete? Do you have to sing ‘A Mighty Fortress’ or any other number of Luther’s hymns, or perhaps there is a hymn not written by Luther that you think is a must-have on Reformation Sunday? Are there decorations or object lessons that are crucial in your mind for a Reformation service to be complete? Perhaps you expect notices to be nailed onto doors or even a door dragged into your church?

I can only wonder what Luther would have thought of all our celebrations of his nailing the 95 theses. I’m fairly sure he’d say ‘don’t worship me, my works, my theses, or my hymns - read God’s word and there find salvation’.

Paul says the exact same thing in the text assigned for today:

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through

the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:20–26 (ESV)

Luther knew all too well that the Law shows us our sin. Here is what he says:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

Luther would fast for long periods, pray for long hours, go on pilgrimages, and even whip himself, all in order that he might somehow make God happy with him. He would even punish himself by spending nights laying in the snow until his fellow monks carried him back inside. He would often go to confession with his pastor and upon leaving would return to confession, to confess that he was not sorry enough about his sins.

Luther knew his sins and felt that God was right to punish him with eternal death. That's exactly what we should also find when we look at God and our good works. Instead the fallen human convinces himself that they are good. We tend to think that we are good people, worthy of God's love. Because of the good things we do,

which points to the good people we are. We compare ourselves to others and say we are certainly not as bad as those murderers, rapists, thieves, robbers, adulterers, or whichever pet sin we want to highlight in others. We believe we are better than all of them and that makes us good.

Being good is just a lie that we tell ourselves. If we compare ourselves to what God requires we see that we have all fallen short, we all deserve as Luther knew all too well, eternal death. Even when we are cutting other people down to show that we are better than them we are actually breaking the eighth commandment. And when we break one we break them all.

The justice we deserve is separation from God, eternal death, and damnation. If we were in charge that would be the justice we dealt out. After all, don't you expect that people deserve to be punished for their crimes? That's certainly what our society teaches us, and if God followed our lead, we would all be condemned to eternal death.

But that is not the way God deals out justice to us. The way God administers his just judgment on sin, as Paul puts it, is to send his Son to receive the punishment that we deserve. Instead of punishing those who committed the sin he chose to place the sins of all the world onto his own Son's shoulders. His Son Jesus Christ took upon himself all the sins of humanity as he hung there on the cross for us. His death doesn't look like justice to us. The guilty goes free (Barabbas) and the innocent is condemned to die.

When we see people nowadays who are wrongly imprisoned or innocently condemned to death, we fight with all our might to have them released. But instead of having his Son released as innocent, our heavenly Father allowed him to take on our punishment, to be whipped for us, to be beaten, spat on, crowned with thorns, nailed to a cross, abused, ridiculed, denied by his closest followers, speared and killed. This is the justice that God deals out. The guilty (us) goes free and the innocent takes the punishment. He takes all the punishment that we deserve for our sins.

God's justice goes further than just taking our punishment, he gives us the righteousness that belongs to Jesus the innocent. Now instead of looking at us and seeing sinners, as he rightly should, and as we still do when we look at other's sin, God looks at us his people and sees Jesus' righteousness. The righteousness of a Son who has obeyed his Father, followed his command to the letter, fulfilled the punishment. 'When He looks at me He sees not what I used to be but He sees Jesus'.

That is why we can proudly sing: "Your works—not mine, O Christ!"

No work that we can do can appease God as Luther found. No fasting, confessing, whipping, or hating of ourselves. Only Christ's work on the cross that is completed can save us from our sin and save us from ourselves.

*²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.
²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3 (ESV).*

Be confident then brothers and sisters, though you are sinners and God is rightly displeased with your acts, your works, your sins, he is just. Not as we are just in punishing each other, but he is just in taking the punishment upon Himself. He brings you into his righteousness and justice by uniting you with his Son's death and resurrection in baptism.

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed". Amen.