

“The Verdict”

“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

(NOTE: This is the sermon I original wrote for Reformation Sunday. Shortly before the service, I decided to take the sermon in another direction, and unfortunately there is no written copy of the sermon I delivered at worship. This sermon is based on the same biblical text and contains some of the material I used in my preaching on Sunday, October 30. – Pastor Jeff).

The 1982 film *The Verdict* stars Paul Newman as Frank Galvin, a Boston lawyer whose alcoholism has affected both his professional and personal life to the point where he makes only occasional appearances at his office, spending most of his time playing pinball and drinking beer. One his few remaining lawyer friends finds Frank what he believes is an open-and-shut malpractice case against a hospital where a medical oversight led to a young woman’s irreversible coma. The case is presented to Frank as one in which he simply is to settle out of court and pocket a third of the settlement, probably the most money he has earned in quite some time. Frank eagerly accepts the case, but when he visits the young woman in the hospital something inside of him snaps and he decides to take the case to court, proving that the doctors were guilty of incompetence and dishonesty. When the case begins, the odds are stacked against Frank: the hospital corporation has hired the most prominent legal firm in the city, and as the trial progresses it appears that Frank has been outmaneuvered by superior legal minds. Everything appears lost when the case goes to the jury; but just when it appears that Frank will be humiliated, the jury surprises everyone in the courtroom when it returns verdict in favor of Frank’s client. Not only is Frank’s reputation redeemed, but the audience leaves the theater stunned at a verdict that no one expected.

In today’s second Lesson from Romans, Paul brings us into an imaginary courtroom where it appears at first that the verdict will be as obvious as it was in Boston. In this trial setting, the case has been heard and the defendants have no more to say; they stand in the dock awaiting a verdict, which can only go one way. They have been accused of violating the Law, the *Torah*, which here means the whole Hebrew Bible and not merely the *Pentateuch*, the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Those who are “under the law” include the whole world which is being held “accountable to God” for their transgressions. There is no further plea that can be entered; “every mouth may be silenced” indicates that the accused have placed their hands over their mouths, a sign that indicates that they have no more to say in their own defense. No others claims will be allowed; no one may raise a voice in personal defense. The very law through which they have sought to justify themselves has now become their accuser; 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.” (3:20).

In the same way the verdict in Boston appeared to be inevitable, those in Paul’s judicial chambers stand hopelessly as they anticipate a judgment against them. But a similar surprise changes not only the course of this trial but the entire message of this lesson; “but now” (3:21) expresses Paul’s excitement at what God has done in Jesus the Messiah. God’s righteousness is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah and for the benefit of all who believe:

- “But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” – 3:21-22.

The newness of this revelation has taken place “apart from law,” for the Torah had pronounced the people guilty. But it is also through the Word of God, the “*law and the prophets*” (a shorthand for the whole of the Hebrew Bible), that the unexpected turn of events will find its origins, which will be good news for all people, both Jews and Gentiles:

- “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’; and again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’; and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” – 15:8-13.

“The righteousness of God” for which the prophets and psalmists had longed for has come to pass as God has unveiled his covenant plan. This righteousness has been revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ,” who has fulfilled God’s promises for the benefit of “all who believe.”

- “God’s long-awaited faithfulness has been newly disclosed in the events concerning Jesus the Messiah. His faithfulness completed the role worked out for Israel and did so for the benefit of all, Jew and Gentile alike.” – N.T. Wright.

Returning to the courtroom, Paul places all people back in the dock: “*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...*” (3:22b-23). Human rebellion led to the loss of the glory of God (“*You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?*” – 1:23). If all have sinned in violating the Law of God, the expected verdict would be that all would be pronounced guilty; but an astonishing turn happens when Paul declares that “*they are now justified by his grace as a gift*” (3:24). This justification happens freely; it is neither deserved nor paid for, but is a pure gift. It is by God’s “grace,” the entire story of God’s love, active in Christ and the Holy Spirit to do for humans what they could never do for themselves. The “*redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” is the complete fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham, who God would make “*a great nation [so that] in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” (Genesis 12:2-3). The means through which this surprising turn of events is made possible is through the self-giving faithfulness of Jesus Christ, whose death on the Cross had the effect of turning away the divine wrath that otherwise hung over all humanity. God’s righteousness is revealed in the gospel events of Jesus’ death and resurrection:

- “Jesus makes it possible for us to become righteous by opening the way for us to share in God’s grace-filled relationship to his creation. Jesus does this by allowing us to trust in him rather than in ourselves to make us acceptable to God. Jesus Christ is thus both God’s righteousness and ours, because through him God restores his gracious lordship over his rebellious creation.” – Paul Achtemeier.

The revelation of God’s righteousness in Jesus’ death and resurrection shuts the door to any suggestion that there might be a special status for which we may boast. Any such boasting is excluded by the “law of faith,” where the true, renewed people of God are to be found. What now marks out the covenant people of God, in the light of God’s righteousness in Jesus Christ, is not the works of the law but the “law of faith” that is in fact the true fulfillment of the Torah; for “*we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*” (3:28).

- “The badge of membership in God’s people, the badge that enables all alike to stand on the same flat ground at the foot of the cross, is faith.” – Wright.

It is not by accident that the words of Paul from his letter to the Romans are at the center of our celebration of Reformation Sunday, for the words of the Apostle had a profound influence on Martin Luther and the transformation of his understanding of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Luther had been raised in a religious system that emphasized what one needed to do to make oneself right with God. Christians in Luther's day believed that all people were born with the full effects of Adam and Eve's "original sin" (the manner in which they understood that "*all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God*") and were thus under the judgment of eternal punishment. In Baptism, a person was moved from a state of sin to a state of grace, but the sacrament could not be repeated; therefore, God provided a "second plank" for the removal of guilt and punishment known as the Sacrament of Penance, which included not only confession of one's sins but also works of satisfaction depending on the severity of the sin. Those who died before they were able to make sufficient satisfaction for their sins were relegated to a place where such sins could be purged; this "place of purgation" – purgatory – was a place after death where the ransomed soul experienced far worse torments than any on earth for purification but where the only exit was heaven itself and the "beatific vision of God." As a devout Roman Catholic, Luther earnestly sought to purge his soul of sin and to make himself right with God. He renounced his worldly possessions and entered the Augustinian monastery in the hope that his sacrifice would make him acceptable to God; but the more he tried, the further away he felt from God's grace, which led to great despair and depression for this young monk:

- "My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled by conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant."

It was through Luther's study of Paul's letter to the Romans that his personal transformation which would lead to the Reformation that we commemorate today began. Luther was one of the few people of his day who was able to read the Bible in its original language; and when he studied the words of the Apostle, he realized that he had completely misunderstood how a person is made right with God:

- "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven ..." (from *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland H. Bainton).

It is not surprising that Luther would later write that Romans is "*in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression.*" (*Preface of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, 1522). It transformed not only Luther's understanding of his own relationship with God, but also the manner in which the people of his time had misunderstood that salvation is a free gift of God rather than one that needed to be earned through one's own understandings, efforts, or satisfactions. It became the inspiration for Luther's *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, Papal decrees that promised to free persons from the torments of purgatory. As a teacher of the church, Luther felt that it was his duty to post these *Ninety Five Theses* "*out of love and zeal from bringing the truth to light,*" arguing that "*any true Christian, living or dead, possesses a God-given share in all the benefits of Christ and the church, even without indulgence letters.*" (Thesis 37). Luther posted these Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, inviting fellow scholars into a discussion on the place of indulgences in light of the teachings of St. Paul which proclaimed that "*if you believe in [Christ], you may through this faith become a new man in so far as your sins are forgiven and you are justified by the merits of another, namely, of Christ alone.*" (*The Freedom of a Christian*).

Luther's simple act of posting his Theses on the church door sparked a chain reaction of events that led to the Lutheran Reformation and the establishment of the church that still bears his name. On this Reformation Sunday, we Lutherans gather in worship to remember these historic acts as well as to consider their legacy for us today. Our understanding of the Christian faith is rooted in this teaching that we are justified – made right – with God not through anything we do but solely through what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The "grace that saved a wretch like me" is God's free gift that is amazing because "*God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8). At the moment when the pronouncement of our guilt appeared to be inevitable, God declares that we are forgiven because of what Christ has done for us. As the *Augsburg Confession*, our foundational Lutheran confession of faith, declares, our faith is rooted in God's actions for us rather than in our actions for God:

- "Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5."

As we commemorate the Reformation today and remember Luther and our forebears in faith, we also are called to consider what it means for us to be Lutherans today. As we prepare in the coming year for the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of his Theses and the events of the Lutheran Reformation, we are called to discern who we are as Lutherans in the 21st Century and how we can be faithful to the heritage that has been passed down to us by generations whose faith has been rooted in this gospel of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. While we are called to work diligently in caring for the mission of Christ's Church that has been entrusted to us, we must always bear in mind that it is not through our works or efforts that we are justified before God; rather, all of our works are in response to the gracious love of God that has set us free from the fear of punishment and condemnation. We are God's people who have been set free to "*serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*" (Luke 1:74).

- "God's gracious action in Jesus Christ is the rock upon which we stand, as Lutherans, as Christians, and as people. As we celebrate Lutheran tradition, we stand upon grace; as we fear change, we trust God's grace; as we long for reform, we base it on God's grace; as we learn about Lutheran tradition, we do it to better understand grace, so that when we preach, we preach grace." – Lura Groen.

Frank Galvin had no reason to expect the verdict he received; it wasn't a result he had earned through his legal knowledge or rhetorical skills. The verdict that we have received from God – declared forgiven and righteous in God's sight – is not something that we should expect, nor is it a verdict that we have earned through our own efforts or works. The verdict that is pronounced upon us is the verdict of grace that is ours when we are born anew through water and the word and declared children of God, holy and precious in God's sight. It is the verdict of grace that is the heart of the gospel that is the cornerstone of our church, the grace that has brought us safe thus far, and the grace that will lead us home. Amen.