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JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, APART FROM THE WORKS OF THE LAW

Sermon for the Reformation, 2016

Romans 3:19-28

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading from before, Romans 3:19-28: <sup>19</sup> **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 may be held accountable to God.** <sup>20</sup> **Therefore no human being will be justified in His sight by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.**

<sup>21</sup> **Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it.** <sup>22</sup> **It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference.** <sup>23</sup> **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** <sup>24</sup> **They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.** <sup>25</sup> **God has publicly displayed Him as the propitiatory-cover through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished the sins that had been committed in the past,** <sup>26</sup> **in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous, and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.**

<sup>27</sup> **Therefore where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith.** <sup>28</sup> **For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

<sup>28</sup> **For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.** What a simple, no nonsense word from God. Simply put: nothing that you can do can save you and give eternal life - it is purely a free gift. Objectively, God has declared the whole world righteous<sup>1</sup>, but the *benefit* of this general justification comes to the individual by God-given faith, that is, by believing and trusting in all that Christ has done. This personal, individual justification is often called *subjective justification*, to distinguish it from the former *general justification*. This passage, Romans 3:28, is the verse where Luther in his German Bible inserted the word *alone*. Thus, “*We conclude that a person is justified by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law.*”

Luther wasn't adding to Scripture, but was simply reinforcing what Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-9: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, that no one may boast.*” Sadly, such good news, such a wonderful teaching is so easily lost. At the time of Luther, it was almost totally darkened and obscure. People commonly thought that to be saved, you had to keep the Law, you had to earn God's favour by working your way up the ladder to Him.

Luther, through the study of Scripture, found that this was simply not true. We do not go to God, but He has come down the ladder to us, so to speak, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to be our Saviour from sin, to keep the Law of God *perfectly* on our behalf. And because of what Christ alone has done, we are justified in the sight of our heavenly Father - meaning we are declared righteous: without sin, pure and holy in His sight. This is the doctrine of justification, the doctrine that was central to the Reformation, the doctrine that is the centre of Lutheran theology. The doctrine that the Church stands or falls on. We are **justified by faith, apart from works of the Law**.

Keeping the doctrine of justification, the clear teaching that Christ alone

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 5:18, 19; 2 Corinthians 5:19

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is our righteousness, our redemption, our propitiation, is why we still need a Lutheran church. Sometimes people will say that all churches teach “pretty much the same thing.” Or they’ll say, “can’t we all just be ‘Christian.’” The sad fact is that all churches do not teach the same thing. And there are all kinds of false preachers and false teachings that go under the name of “Christian.” It’s not enough to just say that you’re a “Christian.” If you listened all the different definitions of what different people think it means to be a Christian, you would end up not having any idea what a Christian is.

The problem is that we are living in a day and age when people are willing to give up any concept of truth, just as long as they can have their own personal desires fulfilled and all their itches scratched. Remember part of a reading we had a few weeks back from 2 Timothy: *For a time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. Instead, they will follow their own desires, and, because they have itching ears, they will surround themselves more and more with teachers,* (4:3). Our sinful nature would rather be amused than accused by the Law. We would rather be entertained than repent. We would rather have passing and temporary emotional fulfilment than everlasting certainty that what God says is true, no matter how we may feel. We would rather see change in the doctrine the church teaches, rather than have a good look at ourselves to see if we need changing.

As Lutherans, if we really are such, we need to say that we are Lutherans who believe the Scriptures, who believe, teach, and confess the Word of God in it’s truth and purity. We believe the Confessions found in the *Book of Concord*, the teachings of the Lutheran Church, because they are in accordance with the Word of God. And at the centre of all these things is the doctrine of justification: that we are **justified by faith, apart from works of the Law.**

Luther wrote that *“upon this article [justification] everything that we teach and practice depends... we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine. Otherwise, all is lost,”* (SA II I:5). Take away this teaching, and

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you take away the free gift of eternal life.

The church of Luther's time darkened the doctrine of justification by teaching that the Law of God was doable - that there are works that could be done to please God apart from faith. But that's not what God says. Speaking through Paul He says: <sup>19</sup> **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 may be held accountable to God.** The Law isn't some kind of direction for us by which we can save ourselves. It strips us down to nothing and shuts our mouths. It shuts our mouths because it leaves us without any way to justify ourselves, without any way for us to make ourselves righteous before God. We have nothing to say in the face of God's law. No "I tried" or "I did some of it" or "I did my best." With the Law it is either all or nothing. And so God's verdict for us is: <sup>23</sup> **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** If you really understand what God's Law demands of you and believe what it says about you, your mouth will be shut. As one who tried to save himself by following the Law, this was Luther's realisation that no one can be saved by the Law, and for a time that led him into deep depression and despair.

Yet, the condemnation of the Law and the verdict that we do not, cannot and will not do what God demands - this is not God's last word to us. The Law of God does drive us into the dust and shut our mouths, but only so that in our silence we may be able to hear God's last word to us and that last word is Jesus. It is Jesus who lifted Luther out of the pit, it is Jesus who does the very same thing for you this day and every day that you are crushed and driven to repentance by your sin. You and I cannot save ourselves, but God has **justified** (us) **freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.** Our justification, our being put right with God, is a pure gift, given by His grace to us unworthy sinners. We do nothing to earn it, and even more than that, we don't deserve it, but out of His great love for His Father and for us, Jesus sacrificed Himself for our sins. He stood in our place and took our condemnation upon Himself, so that in Him, we now become the righteousness of God, forgiven of all our

sins.

This Gospel, this Good News of Jesus Christ, is sure and certain for you. It is the *eternal Good News*, as we earlier heard from our First Reading from Revelation<sup>2</sup>. It is the eternal Good News that is for all people, in all places, including you, right now. It is the Good News that does not change depending upon our human circumstances. It doesn't change for the times or for the people it is to be preached to. It is the same Good News for all. It was true for St. Paul, for Martin Luther, and now for you and me. We receive the forgiveness and eternal life this Good News offers by faith. And even having faith isn't something we do or muster up in ourselves. Faith is given to us as a gift, which is why we have no room to boast.<sup>27</sup> **Therefore where is boasting? It has been excluded.** All the glory for our salvation goes to God alone, who has rendered His judgment upon us as "not guilty." We need not doubt the "not guilty" verdict that He pronounces upon us because He has told us in His Word that it is true, and His Word cannot be broken.<sup>28</sup> **For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.**

Anything that gets in the way of the doctrine of justification, or anything that pollutes it with something we have to do, is not from God, but from the devil, the world, or our own sinful flesh. The church of Martin Luther's time did believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but it also taught that Jesus only did part of the work. You had to do something to help make up for your sins too. You had to say so many certain prayers, or do so many good deeds. But that thinking contradicts Jesus' words from the cross: "*It is finished.*" Sadly, the Roman Church of today still refuses to teach justification by faith alone. It still adds man-made works and doings to the equation in order for you to be saved. So we still need a Lutheran Church that confesses that we are **justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.**

On the other side of the coin, we also have churches around that do claim

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 14:6

to believe in the doctrine of justification, yet they will say that you have to “make a decision” to believe in Jesus. They say you have to “choose” Him. You hear this from most non-denominational churches: “Bible” churches, Baptists, Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, and so forth. Again, this “decision” theology boils down to something you have to do, some work required of you to save yourself. But in reality, Jesus chooses you by His grace alone. He decided for you before you were even born when He died for your sins on the cross and then He applied His decision to you personally when water was poured on you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And speaking of Baptism, most of the churches that teach the “decision for Jesus” theology, also believe that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are things that we do for God. But Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are things that God does *for us*. He comes to us in the water of Baptism to give us the gift of His Holy Spirit and eternal life. He comes to us through the bread and wine to give us the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are the means of grace. They are instruments through which our Lord creates faith in us and keeps us in that faith. They are not works or things we do for God, but things He does for us, to give us Christ, for our eternal everlasting benefit. They are pure grace, pure gift, pure Gospel. So we still need a Lutheran Church that confesses that we are **justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law**.

Unfortunately, even many Lutheran churches have perverted the doctrine of justification. They do this by denying or ignoring the Word of God. They fail to preach the Law and without the Law justification makes no sense and there is no real preaching of the Gospel then either. They say that the Gospel is all about love. Everything is okay, just as long as you love, and any lifestyle is fine as long as people love one another. That is not the Gospel. Love is the fulfilling of the Law<sup>3</sup>. Preaching about love and loving

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 13:10

everyone, as nice as it sounds, is all law preaching. Again, we need a Lutheran Church that confesses that we are **justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.**

The Reformation of the Church that Martin Luther ushered in was nothing new. It was a call to repentance for the Church. It was a call to quit muddying, obscuring and diluting the Gospel of Jesus Christ with legalistic nonsense. It was a call back to the Scriptures alone which teach that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

Reformation in the Church, like repentance in the life of the believer, is an ongoing need. We need to continually examine ourselves to see if this is what we believe, if this is who we are, otherwise we'll end up like the Jews who thought they were in good standing with God just because they were descendants of Abraham. But they didn't have the faith of Abraham.

We are not faithful Lutherans, faithful Christians, just because our forefathers may have been, or just because we go to church, or just because our name may be on a membership list. We are faithful Christians when we believe the Scriptures alone, which give us Christ alone, who saves us by grace alone through faith alone. We can never sit back and say, *"I know all that. I heard it all before."* We need this Word of God constantly, to keep us and to grow us in the faith. In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul writes, *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? - Unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test,"* (13:5-6). What is the test, what do you use to examine yourself? Do you look at what other churches are doing? Do you look at what "we've always done here"? Do you look inward to your thoughts and feelings? No, as Martin Luther did, you use the Scriptures, the Word of God to test and examine yourself. That is the standard.

"Lutheran" shouldn't just be a word on the church sign out front. It should stand for something, for what we believe and confess. We shouldn't be Lutherans just because we were raised as such, or because we married a Lutheran, or for any other reason than that the Lutheran confession of the

Christian faith is true. Lutheranism alone preaches the Gospel purely and administers the sacraments rightly, when Lutherans are being faithful to their Scriptural confession of faith. The world still needs a Lutheran church that confesses that in Christ Jesus we **justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.** Each of us needs that. You need that. Otherwise, how can you know that even though the Law condemns you, you are justified by His grace as a gift? For in Christ alone you have been redeemed. In Christ, you have been freed from condemnation, freed from sin, freed from death, freed from the power of the devil. *“Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will certainly be free.”*<sup>4</sup> Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Lord God almighty, we praise You for calling us by the Gospel into the glorious company of the saints, into the Church of Jesus Christ. We praise You for Your kindness to us, and for Your continual care of Your Church. Continue to protect Your people from the attacks of Satan and from all enemies of Your Word and will.

We praise You especially that, when the Church was weakened by the false words and misguided wisdom of men, You freed and revived it by Your grace and goodness. When people had tampered with the Gospel that we are justified through faith in Christ, without doing what Your Law requires, You once again restored the Gospel. Through Your Holy Spirit You raised up people of courage, and faith, who led Your people back to the living truth of Your Word, and restored to them the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Grant that we may continue in Christ by continuing in His Word, which makes us free.

Protect Your Church today from every false way. Liberate us from all

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<sup>4</sup> John 8:36

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false teachings that reject or corrupt the Gospel of free grace in Christ. Rid the Church of all half-heartedness, love of this world, fear of ridicule, and persecution of the truth. Renew and strengthen it for Your gracious purposes. Preserve each one of us in faith in Your Son, through which we are justified in Your sight. Grant that we may continually trust in Your loving kindness, receive the peace of Your free pardon, and live by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love. Send out workers into Your harvest to preach Your pure, unchanging Gospel to all nations, and richly bless Your Word.

Look kindly on the nations of the world, and especially on our own. Give those who govern us love of the truth, warmth of heart, and purity of mind, that they may serve our country faithfully on Your behalf. Let Your light shine in countryside and city, that people everywhere may come to know You and turn to You in repentance and faith.

God of all comfort, we commend to Your loving care our homes and families, and all people in every situation and circumstance. Be the refuge and strength of all, always ready to help in times of trouble. Bless us daily with Your Spirit so that we may always trust in Your grace alone to save us, through Jesus Christ Your Son.

Finally receive us into Your eternal presence, where we shall serve and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

## Reformation Day

Revelation 14:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell to those who are living on the earth, to every **nation, tribe, language, and people**. <sup>7</sup> He was saying with a loud voice: “Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has **made the heaven, the earth, the sea,** and the springs of water!”

Romans 3:19-28

<sup>19</sup> 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 may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore **no human being will be justified in His sight** by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.

<sup>21</sup> Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it. <sup>22</sup> It is the righteousness of God through

faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference. <sup>23</sup> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. <sup>24</sup> They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God has publicly displayed Him as the **propitiatory-cover** through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished the sins that had been committed in the past, <sup>26</sup> in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous, and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Therefore where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.

John 8:31-36

<sup>31</sup> Therefore Jesus said to those Jews who had become believers in Him, “If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples,

<sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

<sup>33</sup> They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been in slavery to anyone. How do You mean, ‘You will be made free?’”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I tell you that everyone who keeps on committing sin is a slave of sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the family for ever. The son remains for ever.

<sup>36</sup> Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will certainly be free.