

## REFORMATION SUNDAY October 28, 2018

Text: Romans 3

Theme: Faith in Jesus

Recently one of our members sent me a link to a video made by a former head football coach. In this video the coach just received an honorary doctorate and then he was asked to address the graduating seniors. In his speech he told the young men and women he did not want to preach to them but he wanted to share with them the things he believed in. In his first statement he said he believed in Christ and he told them they were fortunate to be in a place where they could express their faith freely. He hoped they would never lose their desire to have a strong relationship with God.

He said he understood their desire to do things on their own and his response to that was simple – if you want to make God laugh then just tell him what your plans are! And then he shared the story of a man who was on his way to a very important meeting but he was running late and the parking lot was full. He cried out to God that if God would open up one of those spaces for him he promised he would go to church every Sunday and he would not touch a drop of alcohol for the rest of his life. Almost immediately a woman backed out of a parking spot and just as quickly the man ended his prayer – Forget it, God! I just found a spot on my own!

On this Reformation Sunday I do not want to preach to you as much as I want to share with you the things I believe in. I was born in a Lutheran hospital, baptized in a Lutheran Church and I have been a member of this faith tradition ever since. And what I most appreciate about being a Lutheran is that we stand firm in our belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. We believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and every time we open its pages it reveals something new about the nature of God and the nature of our relationship to him. It is what happened to Martin Luther when he opened his Bible and started reading this lesson from Romans 3. All of a sudden it made sense to him and now 501 years later here we stand to read the same text so we can put into our own words what we believe.

But before we articulate our faith we have to start from the beginning. You see in the Old Testament, God had this very special relationship with the Israelites. God promised to love them and take care of them. And in return the people had to be obedient to his laws but they failed miserably. On their own they proved to be unfaithful. It did not seem to matter how many prophets God sent to warn them. It did not seem to matter that there were severe consequences for their idolatry and mistreatment of others. It just did not seem to matter.

And this is where Luther got stuck in the early years of his ministry! He knew that he too could not keep the commandments of God. He failed miserably and tried on his own to make himself right with God by mentally torturing himself and by physically harming himself. But nothing gave him peace of mind or a quiet spirit until he read this letter to the Christians in Rome. He heard the words (as if for the first time) that the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel did not nullify the faithfulness of God. God did not break his relationship with his people because of their disobedience! God was always faithful!

So what does this mean for us? Do we have free license to do whatever we want because God will not turn his back on us no matter how many times we turn our back on God? Such is the temptation! After all it is the basis for the popular phrase – Sin Boldly – that came from Luther himself. I have seen those two words displayed on T-Shirts and coffee mugs and caps. I have heard those two words from friends who were heading somewhere they ought not to go. With a big smile on their faces *Sin Boldly* offered an excuse to break the laws of God because God does not break his relationship with us.

It is time again to share with you what I believe ... about us. We do not need any encouragement to sin even more than we do already. We do quite well on our own. In Romans we hear that there is no one who is righteous (no not one). The laws of God are clear and yet we keep sinning. We stand around and boast about our accomplishments but we should be brought to absolute silence before the almighty God. It is through the law that we know our sin. It is through the law that we are held accountable to God. It is true that God will not break his relationship with us because of our disobedience but how dare we think we can take advantage of his grace and love.

As Lutherans we believe there needs to be a healthy tension between the law and the gospel. We need to stand in silence long enough to understand that we are no different than the people found in the Old Testament. And once we have that understanding then we can move towards this God who did another incredible thing. He sent his Son into this world in human form and showed us in a dramatic way who will account for our sins. It is not us! It is his Son who carried the entire burden of our sins on the cross (all of them)! Every lie we have spoken, every time we deceived someone, every indiscretion we did hangs on the cross. It is the blood that was shed by Jesus that makes us right with God.

I believe that without Christ we might as well keep sinning and keep testing God (but no)! That one pure sacrifice changed everything for Luther and if we understand it then it has to change us. We all have sinned but now we are justified by his grace as a free gift. And we sit here today on Reformation Sunday because by faith we believe it to be true.

Do we dare to act like spoiled children who keep asking and asking and asking until we are satisfied or do we get down on our knees and thank this God who promises to never break his relationship with us? We no longer have to fear him or his punishments because Jesus carried it all on the cross. We do not have to look for another.

Luther did say to sin boldly but here is the full phrase: Be a sinner and sin boldly but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. In his letter to Melancthon he writes that if we are to preach mercy we are to preach true mercy that bears true sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner and let your sins be strong but let your trust in Christ be stronger. Rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. No sin can separate us from him but nowhere in this statement is Luther giving us permission to sin. We need to own our sin and understand it to be real for grace to abound.

At the end of his speech, the coach told the graduates there were four things we need in life. Something to do, someone to love, someone to believe in (and he repeated that for him it was Jesus Christ, his Lord and Savior) and something to hope for ...

On graduation day this coach shared his faith with those graduates. On this Sunday I share my faith and my beliefs with you. As a sinner who has sinned boldly, I believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. Amen