

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Romans 1:16-17
January 26th, 2014

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, **as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."***

Paul writes in Romans chapter, "As it is written..." "Don't take my word for it," says Paul. "Look at what is written." And where is it written? Well, in the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, of all places. This prophet wrote six hundred years before the birth of Christ, comforting people, leading them from despair – even in the midst of how strange things may go for them. Which would be true because soon the people and land would be taken by the King of Babylon. Yet in the midst of all that happened, Habakkuk says as Paul repeats, "*The just shall live by faith.*"

Faith is the standard to live by, no matter if it's 600 B.C., 50 A.D. (at the time of Paul) or 2014. Living by faith – living in righteousness by faith – is what we do as Christians. Faith in what? Faith in the Gospel. Those precious words – that magnificent message – those words we need not be ashamed of. The Gospel is foundational. It's meaningful. It's true and correct. It's what we can count on. The Gospel is not just a philosophy or idea that some people carry around or hold on to. The Gospel is not just one of many ways God uses to redeem His people. The Gospel is real, specific, one of a kind, concrete, and trustworthy.

In real specific terms the word, "Gospel" means, "Good News." You remember the words of Jesus to the disciples of John, "*The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the **good news** preached to them.*" That word for good news is Gospel. The poor have the gospel preached to them – it's specific, it's concrete. The Good News for the poor is not, "you will have enough money from now on" – or – for the sick, "you will feel better tomorrow." That's not the good news. But that doesn't stop people from thinking that's what God means when He speaks of good news.

What kind of good news does God have for me today? That perhaps is the question asked by many Christians each day. What will God empower for me to have? What will God determine for a faithful person like myself to hear and experience because of who I am? Certainly the faithful get preferential treatment from God – which means my daily physical life will now be better and see more good things than others who don't have quite the faith I have. Having Jesus means having the feeling of joy, happiness, contentment – because good news is good news, right?

So wrong. That's the wrong kind of good news. To the world, and to many Christians, good news is only that which alters your mood and brings good feelings. While this may be true to some degree, that's not what the "Good News" that Jesus brings is all about. The good news of Jesus is present with you, God's faithful and righteous people, when you have great feelings of joy and happiness AND when you are depressed, grief stricken, distraught, run down, hurt, confused, and weak. The good news of Jesus, beloved in the Lord, is not your jolly feeling – It's that real thing, that God given righteousness, that you have for sure as a faithful person in Christ. It's a death defying gift shed for you on a cross. It's a life giving concrete work that put you first. And no matter how you feel about it today, it still belongs to you. Beloved that's REAL GOOD NEWS. That's a good news that cleanses you and makes you clean.

In both the Old Testament story of Naaman being cured of leprosy as well as the Gospel – the Good News – text of Jesus healing the man with the same disease, God shows us how He makes us clean. Physically, no one was thought of any dirtier than a person with leprosy. They were infectious and impure. Not only physically were they terribly stained and tormented – but also ceremonially. Unclean and unfit to participate in the physical, even the spiritual life of the people – which also made them religious outcasts. They could not practice their faith with the faith community. See how terribly horrific for body and spirit being dirty with this disease was.

At times we feel much like those who had leprosy. I'm unfit to stand in the presence of God. I wish not to even offend my Lord with my sinful self in church on Sunday morning. I'm not worthy – too dirty and stained – too unclean to be in God's holy presence.

It's true – you are dirty and stained. Your sinful human nature that is always a part of you and your life will never be rid of the condition that sin has put upon it. In your sins you might be saying you don't have a desire or need to be before the Lord in His House. In your sins you might believe that you don't feel worthy to be before your Lord in His House. But neither reason is a good reason to stay away from the Lord. Instead, because of your sins, it is imperative and the best reason of all for you to kneel before the Lord – like in the Good News text – and receive from God what you don't deserve. That's what God offers to you – free of charge. That's a reason to be present with your fellow believers because we are a people in need. We need to be cured of our spiritual leprosy.

Our week has to begin somewhere. Why not at these words, -- *"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation."* Every day, somewhere in this world, people are being persecuted for their faith. Not just with name calling or discrimination and favoritism. I'm talking about lives in prison or people being murdered for their faith. There are millions of Lutherans in North Africa on the front lines of a battle against Islam who experience this fight for their lives every day. We hear about Christian Churches being targets and Christian school children attacked because of their association with Christ – as their life is a testament to these words – *"I am not ashamed of the Good News."* The children who go to our Lutheran Schools have no such challenge. Those of us who venture out to attend church have no such challenge. Thank God for that – and take advantage of what is offered to you free from such a level of harassment. And keep in your prayers your church and your schools – our Pre-Kindergarten and their teachers – Martin Luther Academy and Lutheran High – our association schools – so that God would protect them so they can continue to be beacons of light in a world of darkness. Our churches and schools need our prayers and support as they – as all of us – are on the front lines against this world and Satan's power.

I am not ashamed of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's Good News and God grants it – He gives it!! We live in and with this good news and we will live forever because that is His promise. *"The righteous shall live by faith."* That's you. By God's grace through faith, He has made you that way. And that news is good – and good enough to share. Never be ashamed to share the best news there has ever been – Jesus loves you and forgives you. Amen.

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