

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

Just about every week I meet with a bunch of our fellow Lutheran pastors over at St. Timothy's Lutheran. I've talked about this a few times in the past; we call it our weekly pericope study. We look at the scriptures for the next coming Sunday. This past Wednesday as we were gathered together, Pastor Evan Houck from Trinity in Lemoyne, shared a problem that he had recently faced. Two of his members are very faithful in their attendance at church, but their adult son said to him, "Well, you know, I'm baptized, and I believe in Jesus as my Savior. I don't NEED to come to church." And Pastor Houck said "yes, that's technically true, you don't NEED to come to church; but why wouldn't you want to?" "Well I am baptized, and if the Bible is right then I don't need to do anything - if there is nothing I can do, if it works - I'm baptized and I believe. I would really rather sleep in on Sunday mornings."

We debated around the table for the rest of the hour as to how best to respond to this gentleman. Our consensus was that he was being a bit of a smart mouthed guy. But we talked about it and in our talking we remembered that this is not necessarily a problem that is new to this generation. I can remember learning about the Puritans, several hundred years ago, as they set up their community in New England. At first they had the law that only a person who had made public profession of their faith, who had a public conversion experience, could be a voting member of the community. And this was well and fine for that first generation that came over from England and settled down and created their colony. Then their children grew up and started to be of voting age, but didn't have that public profession of faith, because they had been raised in the church; they just never had this big public conversion experience. It caused a lot of consternation among the parents, and they finally decided that "we're going to change the rules a little bit because you didn't have to have this big public conversion experience." They changed the rules to meet the behavior.

Martin Luther was experiencing something a similar thing. In Martin Luther's day the church was doing practices that he just didn't quite agree with. And then he came upon the verse that we heard tonight, from Romans 3:28: We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works described by the law. Because the church in Martin Luther's day was saying there are certain things you **have** to do: You have to come to church; You have to pay a certain amount of money if you want to be forgiven. As a matter of fact, if you are purposely going to go out and sin then you buy this thing called an *indulgence* and you pay x-amount of dollars. The more money you pay the more you can sin. (I said that to a bunch of high schoolers last week and they kind of laughed at me.) But the more money you pay, the greater you can sin. The sale of indulgences was one among many things that Luther didn't agree with. Because we believe that we are justified, not by our money; we believe that we are justified, not by what we do; we believe that we are "justified by faith apart from works."

Okay, so was this guy who talked to Pastor Houck right? He's baptized, he believes; does he HAVE to be here on Saturday night? Does he HAVE to come tomorrow morning? Can't he just go off and live however he wants? Because that was Pastor Houck's suspicion, that what this fellow was really wanting to do was to say "I've got my free ticket in and now I am going to go out and party and do and live as however I please." And there are people who do that, there are baptized people who do that. Another German, Dietrich Bonhoefer, had a word for folks who do things like that -- two words actually. He said that they are trying to live by "cheap grace." They are taking this wonderful gift from God and they are abusing it, their dirtying it, they're mudding it all up. Because they say, God is going to forgive me; it is okay if I spend all of my money on a car while there are people that are starving. God's going to forgive me, it's okay if I go out and get drunk. God's going to forgive me, it doesn't matter that I am not faithful to my spouse. God's going to forgive me.

Now on the one hand, we are all indeed sinners, and we know God is going to forgive us. As believers, though, we are called to live our lives as faithfully as we can. Christ called us - as Luther went on to study in Matthew - in the closing verses of Matthew. Jesus says to the disciples right before he ascends, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and "Go, therefore," he says to the disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He tells his followers to do two things: To baptize; and to make disciples. What Luther was trying to get the church of his day to understand, is that's what we are *still* called to do. To spread that faith, but not only to tell people you are saved by grace apart from your works, but that *because* of that, you are then called to live as faithfully as you can.

Pastor Hardy has been having the staff read this book *Power Surge* written by Michael Foss. I know there are some people here that have read it as well. And there is one section that I read just this week. Mr. Foss writes "The reformation conviction that good works necessarily follows faith would be reestablished as the foundation stone for church affiliation." And then he goes on to quote Martin Luther from his introduction to Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Romans. Martin Luther wrote, "Oh it is a living busy active and mighty thing this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is ask it, it has already done them. It is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such good works however is an unbeliever. Faith is a living daring confidence in God's grace so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes people glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures, and this is the work of the Holy Spirit. In which the Holy Spirit performs faith. Because of it, without compulsion, Christians are ready and glad to do good onto everyone, serve everyone to suffer everything out of love and praise to God who has shown them this grace. Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible to separate heat and light from fire." We are called, Martin Luther says, as baptized believers to live out that witness. Yes, Pastor Houck could say to this young man, "yes, you don't HAVE to do anything, you don't HAVE to do anything, but why wouldn't you? You're baptized, you believe, why wouldn't you actively go out and serve God? Why wouldn't you actively strive to be the best witness that you can be? And if you are not, are you truly that believer?"

One of the books of the Bible that Martin Luther struggled with for a little while was the letter of James. In that letter James wrote, "faith by itself if it has no works is dead. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from works and by my works I will show you my faith." (James 2:18) We have within us that wonderful baptism of God, the burning of the bush as it were. The fulfillment of the promise that God is in us. We are called therefore to live out that faith. Our works to do not save us, but because we are saved we are called to do those works. To love one another, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to cloth the naked. To be gracious and loving to all people regardless of their behavior. The message of the reformation, the message of the gospel. The message as Jeremiah reminds us is inside of us. To know God is to serve God. To know God, God remembers the sin, the yucky stuff, the garbage that we do, knows that sin, loves us any way, calls us to go forth in the name of Christ, serving in all that we do.

Amen.

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