

Talking Ourselves to Death Or Listening to God for Life

Reformation Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

8:30 a.m. Sunday, October 31, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One evening, when my son Matthew was very young—maybe a year old—I was changing his shirt, and discovered a perfectly round set of teeth marks on his chubby upper arm. The skin wasn't broken, but there was a bit of bruising, and those indentations from little teeth. Then I remembered how earlier in the evening, while fixing supper, with Matthew in the dining room sitting in his high chair, I heard a blood-curdling scream from him and immediately following that, the voice of his 4-year-old sister Sarah calling out, "I didn't bite him!"

Methinks she protesteth too much. As do many people when confronted with their sin. I was reading an article by the late Ronald Goetz, professor and theologian, on the subject of how we currently talk about "sin" in our world. Goetz wrote this: *Though many of us were raised in traditions that stressed the depth of our personal sin, we have generally allowed ourselves to be talked out of it.*

Or perhaps I should revise that to say we talk ourselves out of it. Perhaps we are talking too much. And to take that to its logical extension... perhaps we are talking ourselves to death.

See, our human instinct, when confronted with the possibility that we have sinned, or that we are prone to sin, is to talk our way out of this predicament. We do this both as individuals and as corporate groups. First, by outright denial:

I didn't bite him. I didn't do it. I have an airtight alibi.

But when it's clear we've been caught with our hand in the cookie jar, we switch tactics and talk a new way, laying blame at someone else's feet, or hands:

*It wasn't our fault. They started it.
Besides, everybody else does it, why shouldn't we?*

Or we attempt to excuse our behavior by claiming we were at the mercy of something bigger than us that we couldn't control—our environment, biology, social status, or the way we were raised:

*I can't help it. This is just the way I am.
(Or like the song "Office Krupke" from *West Side Story* suggests:
I'm depraved on account I was deprived.)*

Finally, when all those words of denial and blame and excuse do not suffice, we turn to the one who has confronted us with our sin and say this:

*You must have misunderstood what we said and did.
You took it the wrong way. That's your problem.*

We talk and talk and talk some more, filling the awkward silence before us. And often succeed only in digging a deeper hole, a greater predicament. We talk ourselves to death as we run further and further away from the truth about the people we have hurt, the damage we have done, and the God we have disobeyed.

Well, in our lesson from Romans today, Paul says "No more!" Stop talking. Cut the incessant chatter that serves as subterfuge for reality. St. Paul kind-of reminds me of that mother in the Chef Boyardee commercial...the one where she's in the grocery store with her young son, and some employee offers a sample of canned ravioli, attempting to say how nutritious it is, full of vegetables, and all the while the mother, not wanting her son to hear it is nutritious, keeps on—you know—making that slash mark across her neck, keeps on trying to shut the employee up... This is Paul in our lesson today, clearly telling us that all we can do is shut up and be silent before God. There is nothing we can say that alters the reality of sin in our lives. There is nothing we can say that self-absolves. There is no boasting we can voice about the good things we do to make up for the bad things we do. We live under the law of God, and the law of God is doing the talking here, clearly pointing out the depth of our sin. No wonder Paul writes *every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*

You know, our time of confession that opened up this worship service was not intended to be a group counseling session, which certainly has its rightful place in the health and wellness of society. A group counseling session allows people to share with others their personal issues and stories, explore options, seek helpful reflection, and offer mutual support, and that's all well and good. But that isn't what corporate confession is about. Our time of confession here (which, by the way, did not permit us to deny, blame, make excuses, or suggest to God he merely misunderstood us) points us directly to our need for God. We start this worship hour—through our confession—admitting we need God because we can't make it in this world on our own. We fumble and we fail. The good news, says Paul, is that we don't have to try to make it in this world on our own. We were never intended to try to make it in this world on our own. We were always and forever intended to dwell with God, both in this world and the next—whatever that's going to look like. For Paul, the choice is clear: We can either talk ourselves to death, or we can listen to God for life. We can either fill the silence with our countless excuses and obvious self-promotions, or we can let God fill that silence with his creating, restoring, life-giving Word. And that's where Paul takes us in this lesson, a passage of scripture that so influenced Martin Luther 500 years ago, it shaped all his theology and helped set into motion what we call historically the Reformation. Here's what Paul writes: *...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...* A rather large mouthful of words, yet intended to say that God reconciles us to him,

sets things right between us again, not because we are able to set things right, but because God himself—out of his sheer goodness and love—offers to set things right. God, in the person of Jesus, takes up the entire burden of setting things right between us again. It requires first a death, and then a power greater than death, which we could not have managed on our own. For I think it's fair to say that while we might be able occasionally to talk ourselves out of a jam, we cannot possibly talk ourselves out of the tomb.

After that time of confession that opens up our worship—a confession which does have a few words, but also some silence—we hear and receive forgiveness (the very thing we need) from God (the very One we need). Forgiveness is the gift that Jesus is and brings. And when we trust we've been forgiven, we don't have to spend so much time and energy formulating excuses for our behavior, pointing fingers to deflect blame, or trying to score brownie points with anyone. Instead, all our time and energy can be devoted freely to loving God and serving our neighbor. And then, because we will fumble and fail some days—folks, it's going to happen—we gather together here and let God's Word speak once more, so his story will be written on our hearts, and so we will be encouraged for our journeys.

In a few minutes there will be a meal in this room. A very simple meal, but substantial nonetheless. Pastor Peter Marty wrote about this meal recently on the website for *The Lutheran* magazine. Listen carefully to what he wrote:

On the last night of his earthly life, Jesus instituted a sacred meal, the goodness of which we're still trying to appreciate fully... Every time we eat and drink of the bread and wine, we discover all over again that Christianity is not first a set of rules to obey, moral laws to follow or grand ideas to inspire. Christianity is Christ Jesus present with his people... We hear the words "for you," and we know that someone knows us better than we know ourselves. What a blessing, in all of our brokenness, to know that we are precious in God's sight. So we keep on traipsing together to the table, speechless because of God's willingness to forgive and put up with that uneven score.

We will eat and drink, you and I. We will receive God's love, swallow it, hook, line, and sinker. You know, my mother always told me not to speak with my mouth full. She was right, for in this meal, there will be nothing else to say except **AMEN.**