

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus, our Saviour and Lord, be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is “By Grace: the Gospel rediscovered” and is based on today’s Epistle lesson: Romans chapter 3. Let us pray...Amen.

What really is the Gospel? Why was it given? What is its purpose? These are questions which have been debated, and re-debated over the past 2000 years. What really is the Gospel: the Good News? The Law is obvious as it is clearly written on our hearts. The demands of God’s Law are unmistakable: Follow it perfectly or condemn yourself to eternal torment and separation from God. But, what about the Gospel?

Almost 500 years ago, in 1517, the same question was raised. A German man, Martin Luther, posted a sheet of debate questions on the local church door in Wittenberg. Luther had been studying the Holy Scriptures—the Old and New Testament—and something formerly dark to him was revealed in those sacred writings. As a result, he posted his 95 Theses. Shortly thereafter he was excommunicated from the Western church for his teachings and writings. Because he taught the clear word of Scripture, the pope in Rome issued a death warrant against Luther and it remained for the rest of Luther’s life. The issue was, in his studies of Holy Scripture, Luther found something that by and large had been lost for a rather long time, and something the leaders of the church wanted to stay lost for their earthly gain.

Now, Luther had struggled for much of his early life under the crushing demands of God’s Law. Luther knew God’s Law, he knew God’s expectations very well, and he knew he came nowhere close to accomplishing what God’s Law demanded. As such, Luther greatly feared a very angry God who demanded absolute perfection, even when perfection was impossible for sinful man. The wrath of God against sin terrified Luther. He would confess his sins daily, and even hourly, to his father confessor to try to appease an angry God by working off his sins.

Then, through the study of Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, Luther found what was dark, what was lost: the Gospel—God’s grace and mercy through His Son, Christ Jesus. The Gospel gave Luther, and countless others before and after him, a hope and comfort they had never known. The Law remained, but its condemnation was covered by Christ’s blood through Jesus’ own death and resurrection in our place. When he studied and read Romans chapter three, specifically today’s Epistle reading, both the God’s Law and its demands, along with the Gospel: the light of Christ’s grace and salvation shone forth. Paul wrote:

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”(Romans 3:19-20) Obedience to the Law does not save. It makes us and all our actions, words, and thoughts accountable to God. It shatters any hope of inner holiness or righteousness. The Law only condemns by showing how far short we’ve fallen. This is where the church at the Luther’s time stopped teaching.

Yet Paul continued: **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift,**

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation, a full and complete payment, by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”(Romans 3:21-26)

To be justified is to be declared by God as ‘not guilty.’ No longer did the demands of the Law have the final say. The Gospel emerged showing how much God loves His fallen creation. God sent Christ into our darkened world because He loves you. It was necessary for, “...**the Son of Man to be lifted up,** ¹⁵ **that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.** ¹⁶ **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.** ¹⁷ **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”(John 3:14b-17)**

Christ Jesus, the Lord incarnate, took the sins of the whole world upon Himself. Christ then paid for all your sins with His own innocent and precious blood and with His own life. He didn’t pay for only some of them but for every last one. Since “**the wages of sin is death**”(Romans 6:23a), Jesus took your death in its entirety so with His resurrection He gives you His eternal life.

In the Gospel, and through the Sacrament of holy Baptism, God exchanges your unrighteousness for Christ’s righteousness and thereby declares you just—not guilt—and holy on Christ’s account. This Gospel gift is NOT based on your actions, or choices, or anything you do. God’s gift of salvation, His declaration of you being justified—not guilty—is entirely by His grace, for Christ’s sake, which you receive through faith. Paul’s words proclaim how you “**are justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a full and complete payment by his blood, to be received by faith.**”(Romans 3:24-25) On account of Jesus, and His work in your place, God passes over your sins and declares you not guilty.

The Good News is this: “you are saved by God’s grace through faith, on account of Christ, and His work in your place.”(Ephesians 2:8-9) Your works do not save you, nor do they contribute anything to your salvation, because Christ has already done it all for you.

Even your faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit through hearing the Word of Christ. Faith is a fruit of the Gospel, not a work of the Law. Faith receives the gifts of the Gospel: namely forgiveness, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal life.

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation for all who believe. The Gospel is the power to raise from the dead. On Pentecost, the apostles preached, “You killed the Lord of Glory. You crucified Him. But this one whom you crucified, God has raised from the dead.”(Acts 2) Thanks be to God! And just like the Gospel comes to a dead man in the person of Lazarus when Jesus says, “Lazarus, come out!” And the power for Lazarus to rise didn’t rest in him. Jesus didn’t say, “Lazarus, I’ve given you a choice to make. It’s all up to you. I’ve done everything I could, now, if you want to rise.” No. Jesus said: “Lazarus, come out!” and sure enough he did. And where was the power? The Gospel!

Repent and believe the Gospel. Repent and be baptized. Every one of you—the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off.

But the Gospel is not some abstract concept we need to try to figure out. The Gospel is not some theological or theoretical concept which has nothing to do with ‘real life.’ The Gospel is eternal life. The Gospel is clear: Christ crucified and risen ‘for you’. The Gospel is clearly expressed in today’s Epistle reading. We are sinners, unrighteous on our own account before God and with nothing to show or offer. We are beggars, deserving nothing, but receiving everything on account of Christ. The Gospel message was proclaimed by Christ through His life, death, and resurrection, and continued to be proclaimed by His apostles to all who would hear. This Gospel message Paul proclaimed in the first chapter of Romans. He wrote: **“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.”**(Romans 1:16-17)

The Gospel is the power of God. The devil desperately wants it suppressed because it can bring a person from eternal death and give eternal life. This happened in your baptism since **“in your baptism, you were baptized into Christ’s death. You were buried with Him in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too will certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like His. Your old self, your old Adam and your body of sin was brought to nothing, so you would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.”**(paraphrase of Romans 6:3-7) In Christ your life, and He lives in you. In Christ you have the forgiveness of all your sins, you are delivered from death and the devil; in Christ you have eternal life. Though you may not fully see it or understand it now, in death and at the Resurrection of the dead, it will be fully revealed to your eyes.

The Gospel is where the Incarnate Christ comes ‘to you’, and ‘for you’ for your salvation.

The beauty of the Gospel is it is not some idea you have to figure out. This Gospel is water attached to the Word to bring you from eternal death to eternal life, from being a child of Satan to being a child of God, from being responsible for each and every one of your sins to having them all covered and forgiven in Christ. The Gospel takes you from death and breathes eternal life into your soul. This Gospel resounds in your ears and comforts your conscience when you hear the words: “In Christ, all your sins are forgiven.” There are no strings attached. There is no bait and switch. It does sound too good to be true, but only because our sinful ears want to contribute something. The Gospel shows you the Incarnate Christ, your Saviour, and God’s continued work for your salvation. This Gospel is bread and wine, which is Jesus’ very own Body and Blood, and which will raise you on the Last Day, at the Resurrection of the Dead. This is the Gospel rediscovered by Martin Luther, proclaimed since Christ, and rejoiced in by all the saints of God. Rejoice, give thanks, and praise: Christ came for you. Your sins are forgiven. You have eternal life in Jesus. Amen!

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