

Sermon Notes for 10/30/16 (Reformation celebrated)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Romans 3:19-28

Theme: GRACE, THE TRUTH THAT SETS US FREE

The Point: To be justified by faith is to be set free from the coercion and condemnation and domination of the law so that we can live with confidence and hope in God's promises.

Introduction: Boasting has a prominent place in our world, especially in our Western culture. If you are not able to “blow your own horn,” you may be seen as a “Casper Milktoast”, a wallflower who doesn't really pull your own weight. From political speeches to after-game interviews to general intellectual sparring, the successful person is seen to be the one who can brag sufficiently. Remembering Muhammad Ali's “I am the greatest” (which might have been true in the boxing sphere, but hardly in any absolute sense), we can get a sense for this sort of boasting.

Of course, you don't need to get that obvious. Your boasting may be on a more limited basis, but you still have that inclination (as I do) to make sure that people see you in the best light possible. Maybe you don't brag that you are the greatest, but you just like to let people know (like the Pharisee in last week's Gospel lesson) that you are certainly better than the great majority of those folks out there. So you arrange it so that your boss has a clear idea just how hard you work. Or perhaps you are trying to impress a would-be husband or wife, so you make sure that person hears about everything good you have done in your life. Or maybe you just want to make a good impression on a prospective client, so you make sure all your diplomas and certificates are displayed prominently on that wall that he will definitely see and notice.

Paul says that we are all “held accountable to God.” That means trouble for you and me. The problem with boasting of our works is that we are trying to use the law as a tool to do something it was never intended to do. It would be like using a sander to dig a posthole or using a sledge hammer to swat a fly. The law brings knowledge of sin, and this knowledge never brings us any closer to a right relationship with God than eating sushi might do.

The law teaches that behavior has consequences, and we believe that our good behavior should bring about good consequences in our lives. That is the purpose of our boasting, isn't it, to pad our nests with good results that we have brought about through our lives of obedience and kindness and generosity? And that may work with reference to the people around us – or at least with some of them. But with respect to God, we are accountable for more than just a few kindly words or a *summa cum laude* tacked onto our degree or even a successful business career. For what are we accountable to God? Well, the works prescribed by the law are simple – but exacting. “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” – that is what the law demands. This is the glory of God, that potent drive to love without failure and without exception.

And this does not simply mean to try your hardest at being good. It means you are called to love without any failures, without a single exception, without botching it up even once. That is not good news for us, no matter how much our boasting may have fooled other people (and even ourselves). It does not fool God. Martin Luther discovered this. He lived his life as a most submissive and obedient monk, spending hours confessing his sins, denying himself pleasure and even food in his little cell, doing everything the church laid on him as the price for his right relationship with God. But nothing happened. Well, that is not quite true. He became more and more desperate and hopeless, the more he tried to put himself right with God through his monkish obedience. He feared and hated God, because he believed that the “righteousness of God” was that which God demanded of him – and he found himself ever less and less able to produce it.

The outcome of boastful living (as Paul puts it) is that all have fallen short of God's glory. Luther knew it,

and so do you. Every attempt to fulfill God's law on our own brings us into condemnation. Paul says, "Boasting is excluded." He insists that every mouth will be silenced. Our boasting – along with our attempts to work our way into God's favor – will never accomplish what God wishes to have done. Our lives consistently fall short.

One illustration I have heard about this matter goes like this: There is a 100-foot distance between one side of the chasm and the other. The demand is that every human being must clear the distance on your own. Some of us would barely be able to stumble over the edge. Others might have the energy and strength to jump out 12 or 15 feet, if they have good athletic skills. The very best Olympic jumpers might run and get out there even 25 feet or more. But there is not a single person who would be capable of clearing that distance without any help. We will never be put right with God by deeds of our own righteousness. We will only find ourselves condemned, whether we are among the lowest of low-lives or among the most righteous and kind and big-hearted people. We cannot boast, because we have not lived as we ought to have lived – and that truth brings condemnation. "No human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law."

"But now," Paul insists, "apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed." That which we could not accomplish on our own through our works, Christ has come to fulfill for us. The righteousness that we have tried to achieve and to boast about could never have happened if it had been left to us alone. The great discovery of the Reformation is just this: the righteousness of God is not what we have to produce. It is God's gracious and compassionate gift to those who realize they could never accomplish it on their own.

This is the essence of grace, the truth that sets us free. We are now "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." Grace language is gift language. Because Jesus died that horrible death by crucifixion, the penalty for your sin has been satisfied. That gift becomes your alone through faith in the living Lord Jesus. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. But since Jesus has poured out His blood, you are forgiven. You even have the blessed meal by which you participate in that very body and blood of the Savior, given and shed for your life and freedom.

Elizabeth Keckley was a slave who lived in Missouri before the Civil War. More than anything else, she desired to purchase freedom for herself and her son. Her owner agreed that, if she could raise \$1,200, she could buy her freedom. Keckley worked as a seamstress, but it took some of her wealthy clients in St. Louis, who had heard of her situation, to contribute the remaining money she needed. Elizabeth Keckley was finally enabled to pay the price for her freedom as well as her son's. She then moved to Washington, DC. One of her dressmaking clients was first lady Mary Lincoln. Without the help of someone else, Keckley would never have been able to purchase her freedom. (*Behind the Scenes*, Elizabeth Keckley)

In a similar sense, all of us were enslaved to sin with no hope of ever gaining freedom. In mercy and compassion, Jesus purchased our salvation by shedding His blood on the cross. And "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." We are now free from sin, but that freedom does not mean that we do whatever we want. Instead we are to live in the manner that Jesus calls and strengthens us to live.

Freedom is never absolute. "No man in this world attains to freedom from any slavery except by entrance into some higher servitude. There is no such thing as an entirely free man conceivable." (Phillips Brooks, *Perennials*) Luther spoke of man as a donkey or a horse that is always ridden – either by Christ or by Satan. A person is never simply free to do whatever that person chooses. We are either in bondage to sin and Satan – or we are free in Christ to be and to do what He has called us to be and to do. This means also suffering and bearing the cross.

The eminent preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote: “In the ancient times, a box on the ear given by a master to a slave meant liberty; little would the freedman care how hard was the blow. By a stroke from the sword the warrior was knighted by his monarch; small matter was it to the new-made knight if the royal hand was heavy. When the Lord intends to lift his servants into a higher stage of spiritual life, he frequently sends them a severe trial; he makes his Jacobs to be prevailing princes, but he confers the honour after a night of wrestling, and accompanies it with a shrunken sinew. Be it so, who among us would wish to be deprived of the trials, if they are the necessary attendants of spiritual advancement?” (*Feathers for Arrows*, Charles Spurgeon)

So to these young people who come to Christ’s table for the first time today we say this: You are now free to join in this tremendous blessing that our Lord gives to His Church. But this is not just absolute permission to come as you please. Indeed, you have been set free in faith to repent of your sin. You are free to say, “I am sorry” when you have wronged someone. And you are free to come with a repentant heart to receive this meal of life and forgiveness. But if you are unrepentant and unforgiving and seeking revenge, then coming to this meal will only bring more judgment on you. So come with penitent and mournful hearts, and leave with the full joy that comes from knowing that God has accepted you, no matter how people may reject and turn on you. In that kind of living, you will find real freedom.

Conclusion: To be justified by faith is to be set free from the coercion and condemnation and domination of the law so that we can live with confidence and hope in God’s promises. A twelve-year-old accidentally killed one of his family’s geese by throwing a stone at it. Figuring his parents wouldn’t notice one of their twenty-four geese were gone, he buried it. However, his sister saw his crime and said, “I saw what you did. If you don’t wash the dishes for me, I’ll tell mom.” The boy slavishly did the dishes for days. One day, the boy said to his sister, “You do the dishes today.” His sister said, “I’ll tell mom.” The boy replied, “I already told her and she forgave me – I’m free again.”

Our Lord does not want us to live with the blame and guilt our sin produces. As we acknowledge our sin and failures to God, He is eager and ready to forgive us. He has proven that over and over again – the greatest proof is that He raised Jesus from the dead, even after Jesus had died with the entire weight of the world’s sins on His shoulders. Because He lives, you are set free. He is the truth, and it is the truth in Jesus that sets you free. Grace is God’s eternal statement of your freedom. Grace indeed is the truth that sets you free, free to live for your Lord. In the blessed name of Jesus, AMEN!