

Romans 4:1-8

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the great truths of Scripture is this: "(God) chose us in him before the foundation of the world." (Eph. 1:4a) We didn't choose Him. He chose us to be His. And this: "...when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive" in Christ. (Eph.2:5) That which is dead cannot make itself alive - cannot make a decision for Jesus. And connected into that is the statement Christ makes that ties human sentimentality into knots: "No one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn. 14:6)

In his book, "That They Might Have Life", David T. Nile observed, "Christian faith...is not built on my choice of Jesus (but)...Jesus' choice of me. The initiative is His, and He claims me by the right that He made me." And so, once again, our theme for these Sundays of Lent is *From Jesus To Us*; that is, what He gives us through His suffering, death and resurrection. This Sunday . . .

JUSTIFICATION

I. The Ugly Truth - vv. 1-2

The German theologian Oswald Bayer said the following regarding justification:

Those who justify themselves are under compulsion to do so. There is no escape. We cannot reject the question that is put to us: Why have you done this? What were you thinking about? Might you have not done something else? In the other's view of us, and in our own view, we always find ourselves to be the ones who are already being questioned and have to answer. Complaints are made against us. We are forced to justify ourselves, and as we do, we usually want to be right. (Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003],1)

Well, isn't that the way it works? We're constantly justifying our words and actions. And that spills into our relationship with God. God has to love me! I've done the best I can! I'm a reasonably good person. But get this from our text:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (vv. 1-2)

Let's call this the ugly truth. I've had people who have experienced lots of earthly blessings say, "Well, I must be doing something right!" Maybe so. But nothing deserving of God's love! It has been stated, "Here is Abraham, a forefather of the Jews according to the flesh. No doubt he is a heroic figure with works sufficient for boasting before men. But not before God - there is no space for boasting there."

We've talked about it before; this refrain: "If God is love then why does He let bad things happen?" But that isn't the correct question. Never has been. That question assumes humans are basically good and deserving. The correct question is this (as has been stated before): If humans are good and deserving then why do they do the things they do? Why do we hurt others physically, mentally and emotionally? Why do we hate and tell lies and say things that should never be said? Why do we listen to gossip about others and broadcast it? Why do we walk away from helping others when we know we can help? Why are we so absorbed with our personal "fun and games"? Why?

It's the ugly truth, isn't it? But more....

II. The Goal.

Our first parents made the conscious decision to violate God's command. Their fall into sin - their rebellion - rejected the perfect knowledge of God with which God had endowed them. Remember the words? "And they heard the sound of the Lord God...and the man and his wife hid themselves." (Gen. 3:8) They were immediately stupefied! They ignored the consequences of God's hatred for violating His command. Those consequences have marked every generation of humanity: ignorance, shame, suffering, death, hell.

Even we who know the covering of Christ's blood - who know the forgiveness of sin - who hold dear the promise of eternal life - even we, all too often, excuse ourselves. We must confess with Paul, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (Rom 7:19) *Keep on doing. I want to stop! But I can't.* We must confess with Paul: "I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (Rom 7:23)

We don't want to live in error or delusion on this: God does not take away or stop the tragedies that befall this world - your life - my life. He does not stop the sinful drive of man - at this time. But He makes a promise to those who are His in Christ: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) He justifies us!

In the meantime, God uses the upheavals of life. I pray God help you and me to cling to His Word through Peter: "(Trials) have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine." (I Peter 1:7, NIV) That's it! We don't want to see this world as our everything, because - and God help us to hear this and cling to it - because, as Scriptures teach: "you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (I Peter 1:9, NIV)

Well, there it is: The Goal! It isn't this world or what you can dig out of it! It isn't our measurements of worldly happiness and success. No. It's the salvation of our souls. Faith in the eternal life won for us through Christ. And this is where our text takes us....

III. Justified.

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." (Rom 4:3-8)

Got it? "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." That, you see, is to be "justified." For the sake of Christ we are declared righteous, sinless as the Small Catechism states:

"God declares sinners righteous for Christ's sake; that is, our sins have been imputed or charged to Christ, the Savior, and Christ's righteousness has been imputed or credited to us." (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation, English Standard Version, CPH, 2005, p. 165)

It's clear, isn't it? "For by grace you have been saved through faith (faith that Christ's righteousness has been credited to us - our sins paid in full). And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9) Well, that's what our text says; powerful words: "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

Listen to these words of Jesus:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (Jn. 10:7-11)

Seven words in that piece of Scripture say everything: “lays down his life for the sheep.” That’s why Christ came into this world. To give us abundant life - eternal life - by laying down His life for us. It’s wonderfully simple, in one way: “whoever believes should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16)

Emmanuel Swedenborg was a Swedish mystic who died in 1772. I read that he once sarcastically described the Lutheran as a person “locked up in a dark room pacing back and forth repeating to himself: ‘I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone.’”

Well, we don’t lock ourselves up in a dark room and pace back and forth repeating, “I am justified by faith alone,” as if it was some magical phrase. On the contrary, we watch our Lord Jesus make His way to Calvary to secure our pardon and eternal life; to do everything necessary for our salvation so we can thankfully and joyfully cry out, “I am justified by faith alone.”

It’s from Jesus to us.

Amen.

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March 12, 2017

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II. The Goal.

III. Justified.

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