



TOUCH POINT

The Faithfulness of God – Touchpoint for October 26, 2022

Romans 3:19-28 (NRSVUE) ¹⁹ Now we know that, whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;

²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. Through what kind of law? That of works? No, rather through the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

This coming Sunday is called Reformation Sunday in the denomination I grew up in and was educated in – the Lutheran tradition. It's kind of a big Sunday for us because it gets us back to our roots and the insights of a guy named Martin Luther.

So I want to spend some time talking about this thing called Lutheranism. And how I understand it and how it impacts my life.

People sometimes ask me, “What is a Lutheran?” Is it heritage? Is it style of worship? Is it the sign outside the building? What is it? And my reply is that it is none of that. It is about the place of the Divine – the Mystery in our lives.

It's about the subject-verb-object of the sentences of our lives. Who is the subject? Whose activity is the verb? And who is the object? ... of the sentences of our lives?

For Lutherans, as best I can understand it, God is the subject. God's activity is the verb, and we are the object.

So the core for us Lutherans – the bottom line of our faith – is **not** a sentence that starts with “I believe,” or “I accept,” or “I've decided.”

No, it's a sentence that starts with "God has," or "God is," or "God will." God has claimed me. God is forgiving me. God will transform me.

We see this in our bible passage today. Paul writes that the righteousness of God is disclosed:

*"... through the faith **OF** Jesus Christ."*

Now what's interesting is that about half of the bible translations write it differently. They have it as the righteousness of God is disclosed:

*"... through faith **IN** Jesus Christ."*

That is a pretty significant difference. And I suppose which one you gravitate to will have a large impact on how you live your life of faith. For us Lutherans, it's the first translation that is at the core of our faith. We see God as the primary actor in our life of faith. We see the "righteousness of God disclosed" in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

"The righteousness of God is seen in the faithfulness of Christ, by those who believe."

For Lutherans, this is what it means to be a Christian. To see the righteousness of God in the faithfulness **OF** Jesus Christ.

Now if the only way the "righteousness of God can be disclosed" is through **MY** faith **IN** Jesus, well I'm sorry, but the righteousness of God is not going to be disclosed very often.

And that's why this passage from Romans is all about the righteousness of God – the faithfulness of God.

*"**God** did this to demonstrate **God's** righteousness, because in **God's** divine forbearance **God** had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to demonstrate at the present time **God's** own righteousness, so that **God** is righteous and **God** justifies the one who has the **faith of Jesus.**"*

Now again, that last line is translated in some bibles as, "God justifies the one who has faith **IN** Jesus." Which is quite a different meaning, because it puts the focus on **me** and **my** faith.

So, I want to go now to a verse from the gospel reading that is for Reformation Sunday, because I think it can shed some light on this. We didn't read it today, but I want to reference it. It is from the gospel of John 8:36:

"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Here's the thing: If my righteousness depends on **ME**, I will never be free. If my justification depends on **MY** faith in Jesus, I will never be free. I will constantly be checking on myself, rating myself, scoring myself. Do I believe enough? Am I behaving enough? Am I doing enough to belong in the Kingdom of God?

And many churches have become highly successful by setting themselves up as the judge of how you are doing. And selling you a message of how to do better.

And since many churches are doing that to me, you can be damnably sure I am doing that with you. And I mean the word 'damnably' theologically. I will be scoring, judging, and rating you on an even more damnable scale than myself.

But as my friend Henry Rojas likes to say, "It's not an issue of 'IF you behave and believe, THEN you can belong,' but rather, 'BECAUSE you already belong, THEREFORE you will believe and behave differently.'"

We aren't justified because we have faith in Jesus, we have faith in Jesus because we have found ourselves justified by him.

Or in other words, "The righteousness of God, the faithfulness of God, the Son of God has set you free" from having to justify yourself. And that changes everything.

There is a song I kind of like. I've wanted to play it for our Wednesday Respite, but I just can't. It's a song by a group called "Salt of the Sound" and it's entitled, "Find Rest My Soul." The lyrics are:

"Find rest my soul, my home my goal, find peace in hope, and don't let go."

It's got an incredibly peaceful melody that puts one in a relaxed state. But it's the last line that just ruins it for me. The last line is:

*"Find peace in hope, and **DON'T LET GO.**"*

And that is the problem. If I can't let go, there will never be peace. I will always be having to hold on, clutch, keep a grip. There can be no rest in my soul, no peace, when it is up to me to hold on. The only peace that can happen, the only rest that can happen, the only freedom that can happen, is if I **CAN LET GO** and come and rest in the arms of God.

And so it must be that "the righteousness of God through the **faithfulness of Jesus Christ**" is what sets us free to live in grace, and to live from grace.

Our faith is not in our ability to have faith, but in the faithfulness of the one who "... while we were yet sinners, sent Christ to die for the ungodly." Our faith is in the faithfulness of the one who hung from a cross and said, "Father forgive them..."

"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."
"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Jesus constantly tries to free us from ourselves, from our desire to be the subject and verb of the faith sentences of our lives. And that's a different kind of freedom, because usually we think of freedom as being freed from others – from outside events, things and people – but what about freedom from ourselves? Can we as Americans even imagine such a thing?

Isn't anytime we make ourselves the subject of the sentences of our lives, and our activity as the verb of our lives... aren't we just falling back into the slavery of narcissism and individualism? Think about it, how free am I if it all depends on me?

Or as Luther might have put it, "The human will is in bondage to wanting 'free will.'" Wanting to have the final say.

*“The **TRUTH** will set you free and the **SON** has set you free.” Not “**You** will free yourself.”*

The radical nature of the freedom of Jesus is that it is free, and it is freeing... even from yourself. Or to put it in other words: You don't have a free will, you have a *FREED* will.

*“The **TRUTH** will set you free and the **SON** has set you free.”*

It is free, and you are free! Even from yourself, and from having to be the subject and verb of the sentences of your life. Your life is a gift, not a test or a 'have to.' You already belong, before you do or say anything.

*“The **TRUTH** will set you free and the **SON** has set you free.”*

The freedom Jesus is talking about here in John's gospel is the death of the bondage to self, of trying to be the subject and verb of the sentences of our lives, and being resurrected to the freedom of being the object of Mystery's grace, love and forgiveness.

We are the object of the “faithfulness of Christ.” And this is where life is found ... abundant life is found ... freedom is found.

So to get back to the original question, “What is a Lutheran?” I would have to say, anyone who understands the Mystery as the Subject and Verb of life.

Because you see, Lutheranism is a verb, not a noun, that proclaims God's faithfulness, God's righteousness at the center of it all.

And that frees you and me to live and move and have our being within Mystery's grace, love and forgiveness.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

In the Arms of God

(Tony Alonso, Marty Haugen, Michael Joncas)

Refrain: Come and rest in the arms of God. Leave your worry and fear. Make your home in the heart of God. God will dry every tear. For the burden you carry will fade within God's care.
Come and rest in the arms of God.

1) Gentle is God's way and humble is God's heart. God's love will light the way that leads to peace. Surely you shall see God's goodness and God's grace. Rest now in God's embrace.

Refrain

2) Do not be afraid. God heals the broken heart. Through grief and disbelief God still remains. God and God alone will be your soul's true rest. Fall in the arms of God.

Refrain

3) You are not alone, for God is always near. Come place your doubt and fear within God's care. God will give you rest, and soothe your weary soul. Dwell in the heart of God.

Refrain

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

A Celtic Blessing

(Margaret Rizza)

The guarding of the God of Life be on you, the guarding of loving Christ be on you, the guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you, to aid and uphold you each day and night of your life.
The guarding of God, the guarding of Christ, the guarding of the Spirit be upon you.