



TOUCH POINT

Luther and Copernicus – Touchpoint for March 8, 2023

Romans 5:1-11 (NRSVUE) ¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

⁹Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Peace to you from the Grace in which we live and move and have our being.

“While we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

It is called the ‘justification of the ungodly.’ This is the passage all of those in my Lutheran seminary class had to write their final thesis on.

What does it mean that Christ dies for us while we are still sinners and ungodly?

Well, 30-40 pages if I remember correctly. With an oral defense to go along with it. So if you will allow me, I am going to pay homage to my Lutheran roots for the next few minutes. And get some extended value out of that paper I wrote 40 years ago.

Now the focus of all this was on God’s work even as we are sinners and ungodly. The focus was on our weakness and that this is all God’s doing. This is what ‘grace’ means.

The point was that, at the core of our understanding of the gospel as Lutherans, is a simple sentence that has:

God as the subject. God’s activity as the verb. And we as the object.

That at the core of our faith we are **not** the subject. Our activity is **not** the verb. And God is **not** the object.

In other words, at the core of our faith is a sentence that goes like this: “God forgives me.” Or “Christ died for me.”

As opposed to a sentence that goes: “I accept Jesus.” “I believe in God.”

Now that first view of God and humanity doesn’t sit well with many people. We prefer the second view. We have to be in control – the boss.

You see, most of us are still living in a pre-Copernican spirituality. You remember Copernicus, don’t you? He was the one who said the sun did not revolve around the earth, that the earth was not the center of the

universe. Now he was universally condemned when this happened. Not just by the Roman Catholic Church, but by Martin Luther as well.

And while we now realize that Copernicus was right in terms of the physical universe, we still have trouble realizing he was right in terms of the spiritual universe.

And while Luther may have disagreed with Copernicus on physical universe terms, he more than agreed with him on a spiritual level.

Historian Heiko Oberman once wrote, “The two great turning points of the Reformation Age, the Lutheran and the Copernican, seem to have brought mankind nothing but humiliation. First, man is robbed of his power over himself, and then he is pushed to the periphery of creation.”

You see, Luther was the spiritual Copernicus of his day, even if we still ignore him to this day. And he saw clearly what Paul was saying in this passage.

Here is what St. Paul is saying when he writes, *“While we were weak ... while we were yet sinners ... Christ died for the ungodly.”* Here is what he means:

Guess what, you are not the center of your spiritual universe. God does not revolve around you. You live and move and have your being within the gravitational pull of God’s grace. God does not revolve around your pitiful belief system. God is bigger than you. While you were still weak, Christ died for you. While you were still broken and sinful, Christ became one with you.

Paul’s words detonate a bomb inside our spiritual narcissism. They blow up our belief that I am the center of my universe and that everything revolves around what I think and believe.

God has taken control. God has the final say. Not you and not me.

And our pathetic holding out for ‘free will,’ or that our belief and behavior will somehow give us a ticket to belonging with God, is nothing but foolishness.

God has made us God’s own before we do or say or believe anything. We belong, before we believe or behave.

As my friend Henry Rojas likes to say:

The gospel does not tell us that after we behave and believe, then we can belong to God. No, the gospel tells us that we belong first, and in hearing that Word, we will be transformed by the renewal of our minds (belief), and therefore our behavior will produce fruits of that Spirit...

It’s not behave, believe, belong ... but belong, believe, behave.

That’s the story of Good Friday and Easter. We think we can decide who God is and how God should behave. And when God doesn’t act the way we want, we betray him and deny him... torture, whip, beat and crucify him.

We think God is going to revolve around the ways of our world. God is going to revolve around me and my belief system. It’s a pre-Copernican spirituality. My beliefs and my ways dictate the rest of the universe, including God.

And so we kill him. Beat, whip and torture him, and hang him on a cross. This will teach the imposter Christ that we have the final word.

Because death is our final word. Death is our final say.

Our pre-Copernican spirituality has spoken. Our pre-Easter spirituality, as it were. Because pre-Easter, we actually believed our word was the final word and we could stop God.

But low and behold, a couple days later... another word is spoken. A word of life. A word of resurrection. A word of transformation and renewal.

A few days later, Jesus comes back and says, *“Nice try. I’ll give you an ‘A’ for effort. But what are you going to do to stop me now?”*

**We actually believed our word was the final word
and we could stop God???**

But guess what, we just got caught up in something bigger than us. There seems to be another word spoken after our final word. We speak our final word of death, and God responds with a word of life – a word of forgiveness, peace, and grace.

While we were yet sinners, God hung on a cross and pronounced FORGIVENESS. While we were yet weak, hiding behind locked doors and in fear, God pronounced a word of PEACE. While we were in denial, betrayal, and dis-membering, God spoke a word of re-membering.

In other words, God’s ‘YES’ overrules our ‘no.’ God’s ‘YES’ of Easter overrides our ‘no’ of Good Friday and Maundy Thursday.

God’s ‘YES’ is bigger than our ‘no.’

Easter isn’t a second chance to make a choice, which is how spiritual narcissism sees it. No, we made our choice on Good Friday.

Easter is an override, an overrule. God isn’t our co-pilot. God is the pilot and we are the passengers.

“While we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

We think we can be the boss of God. Quoting all kinds of bible passages and theologies to tell God how God has to act **in response** to our actions... leaving us in control.

And so these words from Paul bring us to a dead end and stop us dead in our tracks.

“While we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

If I can sum it up:

It reminds me of when my boys were little, and they were playing video games. I would call them and tell them it was time for dinner. Time to eat. And they would ignore me. And I would call them again and they would ignore me. And finally I would walk over and turn off the game console and the TV.

And they would cry out, *“You can’t do that! You’re not the boss of me!”*

And I would be more amused than angry, because well... they were living in a space I created for them. They were eating food I provided for them. They were enjoying the world I created for them, as well as the fact that I had literally created them.

Which sounds a lot like all the things God has done for us.

So one can only hope God is as amused with us when we venture into spiritual narcissism and pre-Copernican, pre-Easter spirituality, and cry out to God:

“YOU’RE NOT MY BOSS!”

And God responds with these words from Paul:

“While we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

Which are simply a repetition of what happened on the cross when Jesus basically said, *“While you are sinning here, I am forgiving you and dying for you.”*

And what he said on Easter evening as the disciples hid in fear, *“While you are being fearful, I am here for you. My peace be with you.”*

And what he said to them and says to us in this meal...

“While you are being weak and ungodly this day, dis-membering yourself from me, I am being re-membered to you.”

“I’M STILL THE BOSS OF YOU.”

And in that is our only hope – the gracious boss in whom we live and move and have our being.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé 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)

See Him

(Keith Duke)

See him: 1) silent and lifeless, 2) alone and forlorn, 3) broken and helpless...crowned with a garland of thorns, 4) as son and as brother, 5) related to all, 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all, 7) as healer and teacher, 8) as helper and friend, 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him? I doubt if you can.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(“Our Father,” Taizé Reflections)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.