

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2006
Romans 3:19-28

"Faith is the Answer"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Does faith still mean anything? Perhaps more importantly, the question needs to be "faith in what?" Most fittingly, on this day when we observe the 489th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation on October 31, 1517, the word faith will be central to our discussion. Of course, other words will also play a part as well, but faith is central. As we examine closely the words of the Epistle for today, we will see that faith is central to the message of St. Paul just as it is central to our salvation.

There are many uncertainties in the world around us. There always have been, but what is the response to increase violence and immorality, to a lack of foundation and an ignorance of spiritual values? The most powerful answer to these uncertainties is found in faith. And it is not in some general kind of faith, but it is a most specific faith. For as our theme for today would teach us: "Faith is the Answer." We will look at his theme in three parts: Why faith? What faith? And the Reformation faith. God bless us as we hear his word this day.

I. Why Faith?

First of all, the question comes to mind: "Why Faith?" St. Paul answers that most clearly in the opening verses of the epistle for today. Everything else but faith will fail. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." (Romans 3:19-20) Those who live by observing the law will discover that it gives no comfort. For the law will always show us that we are sinners. We fail. It has been said most correctly that there are only two religions in the world—a religion of works and the religion of grace.

Let me illustrate with this example. There has been a renewed attempt in these last years to understand the Muslim faith. The threats issued by some Muslim leaders, the continued violence and hatred spread by some of its followers, the call to jihad (Holy war) that permeates much of the more radical forces within Islam have motivated such an interest. It is most assuredly a religion of works and the law. Its followers seek righteousness by what they do, by their daily prayers, by their fasts and observances of the law as they believe it was revealed by Mohammed. And that is the case whether they are extremists, fundamentalists, or moderates. They share this with the modern Jewish faith as well, which in its inheritance from the Pharisees is a religion of the law, of observing the commandments. And lest we forget, the religion of the law has its adherents within the Christian faith as well. Indeed at

the time of the Reformation the church was filled with indulgences and works of penance, with fasts and vigils and prayers to the saints, with obligations and duties. It had become a religion of the law and of works. And still today, there are those who would make the Christian faith a religion of works. They speak of the “law” of the Gospel.

II. What Faith

And in sharp contrast to this religion of the law stands the religion of faith. St. Paul expresses it without doubt in the following words from our text: But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:21-24) God reveals his righteousness for us and it comes to us through faith. Yet as our text explains, this is not some generic, general, non-specific faith. It is not a feeling or a trust merely in a higher power greater than ourselves. No, it is faith in Jesus Christ. It is faith in the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. And here in these words is the thing that sets apart the true faith from all the other religions of the world. It is centered in Jesus Christ. It is a faith based on the work which our Lord accomplished for us. As Paul writes, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” (Romans 3:25) What a priceless gift this is. And what a joy to know our salvation is purchased and won for us. It is not dependent on what we have done or will do. It is based solely on the work of Jesus Christ who has paid the price, who has redeemed us “not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death.” That is the faith that saves. It is a faith with content, a faith with an object to believe. It holds onto Jesus Christ alone.

And in all the talk we hear today about the sameness of all religions, the “faith” that is shared by all people, these words of our text put the lie to all such talk. For the only faith that saves, the only faith that matters is faith that has Jesus Christ as its anchor. As Paul concludes the epistle for today, “Where, then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” (Romans 3:27-28) The Apostle Paul says the same thing when we write to Titus, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:5-7) It cannot be said any better than that, but we must continue to say it. For the old man, the unregenerate nature is always ready to place the glory in ourselves rather than in God’s work, and for that reason we need a continual reformation.

III. The Reformation Faith

If you have been carefully listening to this sermon, you might have noticed that I have

preached an entire Reformation sermon without mentioning Martin Luther. Now in a Lutheran Church, that might be something of a miracle! But this sermon has been about faith, the Reformation faith, the Scriptural faith which has been revealed for us. Yet perhaps it is fitting that we let Dr. Luther explain what that faith meant to him as he wrote toward the end his life of his personal spiritual struggle, "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteousness of God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without have God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!' Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it, the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness of God with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' ... And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word, 'righteousness of God.' Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. (Luther's Works, v.34, p.336-337)

In these days of uncertainty, of fear the answer is faith. It has always been the answer in Jesus Christ our Lord. And with our opening hymn we can again say:

Since Christ has full atonement made
And brought to us salvation,
Each Christian therefore may be glad
And build on this foundation.
Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,
Your death is now my life indeed,
For you have paid my ransom.

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone
And rests in him unceasing;
And by its fruits true faith is known,
With love and hope increasing,
For faith alone can justify;
Works serve our neighbor and supply
The proof that faith is living.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.