

“Re-Formation Day”
Romans 3:19-28

October 31, 2010

Reformation Day

Reformation Day - what an important day for Lutherans! It is to our church what Independence Day is to our country. Independence Day is when we remember our independence from the British empire, exalt heroes like George Washington and Paul Revere, sing patriotic songs, and feel very proud that we are Americans. Reformation Day is when we remember our independence from the Catholic Church, exalt our hero, Martin Luther, sing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, and pat ourselves on the back for our obvious superiority as Lutherans.

However, if that is all our Reformation Day service is all about - Catholic-bashing, Luther-exalting, and *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* -singing, then we miss the point. Martin Luther would be appalled by such attitudes. Reformation Day is not so much about being “Lutheran” (something Luther himself would not have liked), but about being “re-formed”. Specifically, Reformation Day is all about “re-forming” (i.e. making over) various concepts we have about the Law, ourselves, God, salvation, and our present day lives. And, for that “re-forming”, look to the epistle for today from the third chapter of Romans.

First, we need to look at our concept of the Law of God and its purpose. Many see God’s Law as the means by which we can come into a right standing before Him. Throughout Bible times, people thought that if they obeyed God’s Law, God would love them and happily accept them as His people. Conversely, they thought that, if they disobeyed God’s Law, He would hate them and angrily reject them. The Pharisees, of whom we read so much about in the New Testament, fiercely emphasized obedience to every single Law of God in order to be right with Him. That’s why they were so critical of everyone, including Jesus, who didn’t follow every minute point of the Law.

In Martin Luther's time in the 16th century, things had gotten even worse. Luther was taught and believed that, in order to make it to heaven, He had to obey the Law of God. He was so distraught by his inability to do so that, as a monk, he would starve himself, deprive himself of sleep, and even beat himself in order to make up for all of his shortcomings and failings in obedience.

Today, the thought that God's Law and our obedience to it is our ticket to heaven is still around. When making evangelism calls and asking people how they hope to get to heaven, they often give answers such as: "I try to live a good life"; "I follow the Golden Rule"; and so on. The answers share a common theme: they are all based on the notion of "being good" and obeying God's Law.

Our epistle today "re-forms" our ideas about the Law. St. Paul writes, "by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." Why? God is holy and demands that we be holy like Him. No one could possibly ever hope to attain that standard, no matter how good they were or how hard they tried to be obedient. Rather than being a way to heaven, the Law of God, Paul says, makes us conscious of our sin and how we have failed, compared with God's standard of holiness.

Secondly, we need to look at the concept we hold of ourselves. Despite condemnations for those who violate God's Law, most people view those as applying to someone else. The Jews viewed Gentiles as moral inferiors who deserved God's wrath. In Luther's time, those who did not observe every rite and ritual of the Church were viewed as inferior and deserving God's wrath. Today, we may view those who are not American or are not faithful and active members of the Church as being the sinners who are condemned by God's Law.

Our epistle lesson "re-forms" our ideas about ourselves. Paul is quite blunt in his description of humanity. He uses all-inclusive words to describe those who have failed God. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," he says. There are no exceptions. "Every mouth may be

stopped,” he says. The picture here is of a “defendant in court, who given the opportunity to speak in his own defense, is speechless because of the weight of the evidence which has been brought against him and awaits his condemnation.” (Cranfield, p.196-197). “The whole world may be held accountable to God, “ Paul says. Everyone in this world -- no matter how good they think they are, no matter how much they think they are in the “right group” of people -- stand before God, “their guilt proven beyond all possibility of doubt, awaiting God’s sentence of condemnation.” (Cranfield, p.197)

Thirdly, we need to look at our concepts of God. Typically, people tend to hold one of two concepts about God. One concept, which was popular during Luther’s time, is that since God is holy, He is an angry God who delights in sending sinners to hell. Medieval paintings and stained glass windows often showed Christ as an aloof judge who strikes down people for their sin and demons crawling up from hell to snatch people and drag them down to the eternal flames of hell. People in Luther’s time feared God and His wrath. Some people today likewise can only see God as Judge and Punisher. They fear him and what will happen after death.

A second concept, which is probably a result of the Reformation, is that God is our friend, our buddy, our pal who doesn’t want us to sin, but who, if we do sin, will simply overlook it and say, “That’s all right. You tried your best.” People find this concept of God to be very comforting and one which allows them to do whatever they want because that kind of God doesn’t get all bent out of shape over sin and send people to hell over it (at least not ordinary people like us -- maybe Adolph Hitler or Osama Bin-Laden).

Our epistle lesson “re-forms” our concept of God. He is neither of those extremes, yet he is both. He is a God of justice. He *does* care about sin. Because of His holy nature, He cannot overlook or ignore sin. He cannot let sin go unpunished for, to do so, would be to condone sin and deny His nature. At the same time, He is a God of grace and undeserved love. He *does* care about sinners. Because of His loving and merciful nature, He cannot bear to punish sinners and send them

to hell. He loves us and wants us to be righteous (i.e. have a right standing) before Him now and forever.

And that brings us, fourthly, to our concepts about salvation. Because of our “re-formed” concepts of God being just and holy and loving and merciful, we seem to have to choose one or the other regarding salvation. If God is just and holy, then the only way it seems to get to heaven is by slavishly obey the Law of God and God judges us to be just. If God is loving and merciful, then it seems that heaven is open to everyone, regardless of belief or behavior, and God simply overlooks sin. Neither concept is true.

Our epistle lesson “re-forms” our concept of salvation. God’s Word emphasizes that He is, first and foremost, a loving and merciful God who has provided a way for us and all people to be right with Him and go to heaven. Paul writes, “But now the righteousness from God has been manifested apart from the law, has been made known, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.” This way is “apart from law”. In other words, it is not dependent upon our obedience. Paul goes on, “The righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift. We are justified - declared to be not guilty - freely and not because we have sufficiently paid our debt of sin by good deeds and obedience. We have a right standing before Him because of His grace -- a love for us that is neither earned nor deserved.

But does that mean that God has simply overlooked our sin or ignored it? Does it mean that God has denied His very nature and is no longer a holy and just God who hates and punishes sin? Is He some divine wimp who doesn’t stand for anything any more? Not at all. “For God to have forgiven men’s sins lightly -- a cheap forgiveness which would have implied that moral evil does not matter very much -- would have been altogether unrighteous, [and] a violation of His truth.” (Cranfield, p.213-214) No, the price for sin would have to be paid. The punishment for sin would have to be inflicted. The wrath of God would have to be satisfied. And it was....in Jesus Christ.

Paul says, “[W]e are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” To “redeem” means to buy back; to pay the price owed for something. Back in the days, when stores gave out S&H Green Stamps, you could collect them in books and then redeem them for prizes, that is, use them to pay for the items you wanted. Likewise, Jesus paid the price for the sin - a price owed by us, a price we could not pay - to buy us back for God.

And what a price it was. Paul write, “God put [Him] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” “Propitiation” is where an innocent victim endures the wrath and punishment of God to “propitiate” or appease God’s anger over sin. On the cross, God unleashed the full fury of His righteous wrath and the fair and right punishment for the sin of the world upon His only Son, Jesus Christ. It sounds so cruel! Why did He do it? The epistle says, “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” God was being just and fair. Up until the time of Jesus, He had held back His wrath over sin. “Sins were neither punished as they deserved nor atoned for as they were going to be.” (Cranfield, p.212). But God punished the sin of the entire world - past, present, and future - in the person of Jesus Christ so that He could be loving and merciful to us. Jesus was rejected by His Heavenly Father on the cross and endured His wrath so that we might be accepted by God and see Him as a loving Heavenly Father. Jesus died the death of a sinner so that we could live the life of a saint -- totally holy and acceptable in His sight.

That leaves us with one final concept that needs then to be “re-formed”: our attitude about that right relationship with God. The Jews bragged because they considered themselves to be “the Chosen People” and we somehow deserving of God’s favor because of their biological background. On Reformation Day, we may tend to brag that we are Lutherans and are somehow deserving of God’s favor because of our denominational background.

Our epistle even “re-forms” that attitude. Paul writes, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” There is no room

for boasting about how moral we are, how obedient we have been, or about any part we think we've had in being saved -- whether its being confirmed, being a life long Lutheran, or having made a decision for Christ or inviting Jesus into our hearts. All boasting is excluded. Our salvation, from beginning to end, is God's action, motivated by His undeserved love for us, and accomplished by Jesus' willing sacrifice upon the cross. Our salvation is received by solely by faith which is also God's gift to us - created in our Baptism, sustained by His Holy Word, and nurtured for us in the Holy Supper of our Lord. As Paul concluded and we still conclude today, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Reality TV is extremely popular these days and one of the nicest shows in this category is Extreme Makeover Home Edition. In this show, a crew comes to a family who is in need, completely guts their house, and makes it over into a stunning new home. What makes the show appealing is the gratitude and tears of the family who has seen their poor dwelling made over without their help and who now dwell in a lovely home. Reformation Day might be called Extreme Makeover Church Edition. God, through the efforts of Martin Luther and many others, made over His Church which taught of an angry God who could be appeased only by the meager efforts of poor sinners to keep His Law perfect. He has transformed His Church into a place which teaches of a loving God whose anger at sin has been appeased by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is now merciful and forgiving toward sinners, and who has given a right standing and eternal life to all who believe it. Our gratitude and joy, as we enjoy this lovely dwelling called the Church, therefore, is not directed toward ourselves or even Martin Luther, but to God who has made, who makes, and will continue to make all of this possible. Amen.