

"Both/And"
Romans 3:19-28

October 25,2015

Reformation Sunday

An old phrase says, "You can't have your cake and eat it, too". It refers to the fact that you can't have two mutually exclusive options at the same time. You can't possess a cake – whole and untouched – while, at the same time eating said cake. You can have a cake or you can eat a cake, but you can't both have a cake and eat a cake at the same time.

I don't know if Martin Luther knew this old saying about cake. I doubt that it was around at his time. But he struggled with the concept that it expresses. Can God be holy and just and punishing those who are not holy, while, at the same time, being loving and merciful and forgiving those who are not holy at the same time? It certainly seems like a "having cake vs. eating cake" quandary. God must be holy and just or God must be merciful and forgiving. He can't be both, it seems. However, our text for today indicates that both of these good and seemingly mutually exclusive options CAN be had at the same time when it comes to God.

Our text for today talks about "the righteousness of God." This means God is just and holy. He does not have sin or evil in Himself. Sin angers God. When Luther read about this just and holy God, he was greatly troubled because of his sin. Luther wrote, "Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him." Do you share Luther's feelings and feel troubled about a just and holy God? Do you hate the thought of it and complain about it? Or, do you just re-define God to be One who is not so strict and not quite so angry? If so, you have created your own idol.

The Bible also makes the point that God is a righteous judge. Earlier in Romans, Paul writes that those with "unrepentant hearts" are "storing up wrath" for themselves "on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5). Our first lesson for Reformation Sunday emphasizes the same thing when it says, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come." We don't like judgment and condemnation. We prefer acceptance and affirmation. But God being a just judge of all people and all things has implications for us. The

Creator expected His creatures to be like Him. He is just, and He expects us to be just. He is righteous and He expects us to be righteous. He is holy and He expects us to be holy. And if we are not, God will punish our transgressions of His Law – not just the big bad sins, but every sin. That is justice. How do you feel about the prospect of standing before a judge who is perfectly just and will judge every thought, word, and deed you've ever had?

Naturally, then, God's Law is also just. It should be no surprise that a just God and a just Judge would give just Commandments so that we would know clearly what He requires of us to be just and holy in His sight. Paul says in Romans that God is completely fair and just so that no one has an excuse before God. Both those who have the written Law, namely the Jews, and those who do not have the written Law, namely the Gentiles, have the same standard of justice. For although the Gentiles did not have Moses and the Ten Commandments, they had what we call the moral law, written not on stone, but into the very fiber of their being as God's creatures. In fact, all people of all time have this knowledge. As Paul writes earlier in Romans, "By nature [they] do what the law requires..They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts." (Rom. 2:14,15)

The Law is so "just" that it rewards obedience. Paul says it is the "doers of the law who will be justified" (Rom 2:13), that is, made right with a holy God. God is quite fair. If you want to be right with a holy God and spared of His anger and punishment, then always be a doer of the law in every way. Sounds simple doesn't it? The rich young man we read about two weeks ago thought he had done it. Some today might dare to claim the same thing.

But here's the problem. Although God is just and judges justly and gives just Laws, we, sinful humanity, are unjust. That is, none of us is perfectly just, righteous, or holy. This lack of justness, righteousness, and holiness is called sin. It is an infectious spiritual disease with which all have been afflicted since the time of Adam and Eve. If your conscience doesn't convict you of this truth or you think the Scripture is unclear about the matter, take a look at the verses preceding our text. Paul writes, "Both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written [and here he begins to quote Scripture], None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside;

together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Rom. 3:9-12) And that’s just the beginning. He continues with more. Do you hear the all-inclusive, all-embracing language here? Paul sums it all up in our text when he writes, “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:22-23) God is holy, and we are not. God is righteous, and we are not. God is just, and we are not.

This is a deadly problem! If God and His Law are just and we’re not, if the doers of the Law will be justified, and yet no one does the things of the Law perfectly, how can anyone be justified? Do you want to face a just and holy God with your record of obedience or lack thereof? On the other hand, how could God be truly just if he *does* justify, the unjust sinner? How can there be justice if sinners get off scot-free? Do you want to face a God who is untrue to Himself and unfair to you?

There seem to be only two options: God is just and He must punish us who are unjust, or God does not punish the unjust and therefore He isn’t just.

This is a real problem for God. He *can’t* be unjust. Being holy and just is part of His nature and He cannot go against His nature. Yet He *wants* to justify us – make us right with Him – so that we might live forever with Him because He’s also perfectly loving. He can’t not be loving either. So, can God have his cake and eat it, too? Yes, He can.

God devised a “both/and” plan so that He could be both just *and* loving. Paul sums it up in our text. We “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, *so that he might be just and the justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Our holy God was patient with us unjust sinners. He did not punish us immediately as we so richly deserve. He passed over former sins because of His divine forbearance, but He did not forget them, nor did He let them go unjustly unpunished. God demonstrates His own *just* nature by demanding payment by punishing sin with death and hell that sin deserves. But He fulfills His desire

to be the *justifier* of sinners by Himself becoming that payment. He took on human flesh and blood and became one of us. The payment was Jesus, the Just One.

God is shown just in His Just One, His only Son. In Jesus, God provides a substitute for us. Jesus the Just One faithfully lived under the Law, fulfilling it perfectly, and then offered His perfect life on the cross as the redemption – the payment price of His own blood – for our sins. There the penalty for our being unjust, those very sufferings of hell itself, fell on Him. On the cross, He became everything that is “unjust”. As the Scriptures says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Then, in what Luther called “the happy exchange”, Jesus faithfulness is applied to us. His faithful obedience is credited to us. The punishment He suffered is applied to our sins. The Just One makes us just in God’s eyes.

Christ’s work allows God to justly punish sin and graciously forgive sinners at the same time. This is neither achieved by us or deserved by us. Paul says, “[We] are justified by his grace as a gift.” Gifts are not earned but received. We receive His redemption when we are baptized or when the Word of God is shared, taught, or preached to us – all very passive activities.

Paul goes on to emphatically state, “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” That means nothing we do factors into us becoming right with God. Rather, it is trusting in all that Jesus had done for us – living the perfect life we couldn’t do and suffering the punishment that we should do. Even that faith is not something that originates within our hearts or our will. It, too, is a gift of God as Paul reminds us in Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this [faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This is the joyous Good News which Luther not only discovered (others had as well) but boldly proclaimed. It literally changed the world and is the reason we are here today. Luther had always been taught to think of God’s righteousness, His justice, as that just standard by which God punished unrighteousness. But when he came to realize that righteousness is something God gives to us by faith, apart from good works, he said it was, as if he “was altogether born again and had entered

paradise itself through open gates.” (AE 34:337). And that Gospel that Luther and other Reformers preached, proclaimed, and taught has been going out to the world ever since. It gives us peace in the place of guilt, joy in the midst of sadness, and hope for the future to replace the discouragement of the present time.

So, add one more miracle to God’s resume: He CAN have His cake and eat it, too. He can be a just and holy God who can and must punish sin. He can also be a loving and merciful God who can and does forgive sin. The key is Jesus. He takes God’s anger and punishment for us and gives God’s mercy and forgiveness to us. And that is reason to celebrate, not just on some arbitrarily set “Reformation Day”, but every day of our lives. Amen.