

Reformation Sunday  
October 27, 2013  
Poulsbo

Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Psalm 46  
Romans 3:19-28  
John 8:31-36

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

These are powerful words. They bring down and raise up at the same time. They blast any notion that one person is better than another, that God might favor one person more than another. They blast any notion that you might have any say in the matter of your salvation. They blast any notion that you might be able even a little bit to be a good person or do good things. And then they proclaim that Christ Jesus has brought you redemption. And these words lift you up out of the pit they threw you in and declare you justified. Not by any merit or choice of your own, but just by the grace of God. These are the very things the reformers lifted up to show that the church was not showing the people a Scriptural view of God.

And it's a good thing the Spirit is constantly reforming the church, because we need it. The Reformation as a sociopolitical movement has ended, and the Roman Catholics and Lutherans came to a mutual understanding on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. But reformation never stops. As long as there are sinners involved in the church, the church will need reforming.

These days in popular Christianity, we have put God's grace in a straightjacket. We hear “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” and we rejoice in God's astonishing, unconditional grace. And then we open our big mouths.

We proclaim, “Justified by grace as a gift.” We even say, “No strings attached.” And then we add strings. Whether those strings be, “You just have to open it,” or “You just have to accept it,” or “You just have to invite Jesus in,” or “You just have to make a decision for Christ.”

All of those caveats strip God's grace of all its power, and Christ has died for nothing. This was what Luther discovered in Scripture and why he was emboldened to speak up. He saw that to put conditions on God's grace in any way was contrary to the Word of God.

But we just can't help ourselves. We're faced with truly unconditional grace, and it makes us uncomfortable. We get it in our heads that if grace is free, that cheapens it. That if God really justifies without any input from us, then what's the point? Anybody could be justified. And that can't be right. Can it?

And if God justifies without any input from us, then what's to stop me from just doing whatever I want, since God has justified me? Well, nothing. And that's the point. If it had anything at all to do with your action, be it choice, decision, or faith, then Christ died for nothing.

But doesn't that take away my free will if God does this without my input? Yes. Because the thing is, free will is a human construct. It's not biblical. God created us independent, cognizant beings, so that we could make choices about our lives day in and day out. But God never gave up the authority as creator to govern whose you are. You are a creation of God and because God says so, you are stuck to God.

If these assertions about grace chafe a little (or a lot), then we're getting at something Godly here. Because God's way of doing grace chaps our hide. It is unconscionable that that person so obviously undeserving should be a recipient of God's grace. (And grace says, "Hello, sinner. May I offer you a mirror?") But it's not right that that person who is so obviously unrepentant should be a recipient of God's grace. What about "known by our fruits?" (Where's that mirror?)

What then of faith? Don't we have to have faith in order to be justified? Yes. But remember what faith is. Faith is not ours. It's God's. Even in this text, the phrase translated, "he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" is better translated, "he justifies the one out of the faith of Jesus," or "because of the faith of Jesus." Not "in Jesus". "Of Jesus." In other words, it is *Jesus'* faithfulness which makes you justifiable. Jesus has stuck himself to you, not the other way around.

And even if we are blind to our own unrepentance and unworthiness and believe somehow that there's some difference between those of us who seek to bear fruit and those who don't seem to, we are again confronted with this: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

And when this grace makes us squirm, makes us try to find the loophole, makes us indignant at the injustice...then we know we're approaching an idea of what God's grace is all about.

God's grace will not be boxed up, guarded, or held to exclude someone. God's grace will not have our caveats of "all you have to do is..." God's grace is offensive to us. It's not fair. It's not just.

And thank God for that. Because this radical nature of God's grace that justifies even the most undeserving among us also justifies us. Arrogant in our faith, taking credit for something Jesus has done, holding back the grace of God with our laws of "all you have to do is...". Is not holding back the grace of God and making it dependent upon human action a greater sin?

"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

And finally, when grace has held that mirror up to us to see our own unworthiness, when grace has brought us down from the pedestal from which we view the rest of the world, when grace has showed us that we are damnable, then, THEN grace lifts us up, forgives even us, and sends us out again into our lives renewed, restored, reformed. Because Christ has done it. You are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God!