

+ October 28th, 2018 + Reformation Sunday +

(I am indebted to Rev. Alvin Wagner for his Sermon and thoughts on this text, some of which are reflected in this sermon...)

Grace to You and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Romans 1:17: (Please Rise) "The just shall live by faith."

We Pray: Heavenly Father, We thank you for the free gift of salvation that comes to us by faith. Keep us and preserve us always in this true faith, that trusts not in ourselves or our own efforts or work, but in the work that Your Son, Jesus carried out to make us righteous. We pray this all in His name. AMEN. (Be Seated)

Though just six syllables long, our text is incredibly important! Historians have called it "**The Verse that Made Martin Luther!**" Luther himself would agree. He said this verse: "**The just (or "righteous") shall live by faith**" was behind the most important "AHA!" moment of his life. When he understood that this verse was saying that we are "just" or "righteous" before God because of our faith – and not because of our own efforts or merits, Luther described it as if he "*Had been reborn and had entered Paradise through widely opened doors. Instantly all of Scripture looked differently!*" He explained that before he had loathed the "righteousness of God" because He knew he could never accomplish or live up to it, but by this verse, Luther recognized that this "**righteousness of God**" was shared with all who have faith in Jesus.

Though short and sweet this verse is an excellent summary of the Gospel message – one that should never be taken for granted, but treasured, preserved, and shared. Certainly, **This Verse Made Martin Luther...** But Dear Friends, realize that it **Also Makes US** who we are today! It makes us understand the Gospel message of God's Love and Salvation...

When Luther was a boy, he saw God as an angry Judge. Martin (as was common among the people of his day) was scared of God because he realized that he failed to live up to the standard of perfection that God's Law demands. Not even in his baptism did Luther find comfort – for that too was seen as something you HAD to do to appease an angry God! This misunderstanding of God – NOT as good and gracious, but as an angry judge – caused many other problems in the church. People turned to Mary and to the Saints in prayer because they seemed nicer and more loving than God and Jesus!

How sad! The Gospel was missing! Consciences were heavy and burdened! But also how blessed WE ARE! How different we have it – that from infancy we have known God's Love. Our children are taught to sing: "**Jesus Loves Me This I Know!**" The Gospel message – that our Loving Savior has won our salvation for us and gives it to us as a gift – is clear and present in our midst – don't ever take it for granted, but be thankful for this Gospel message that we have!

When Martin Luther was a teen we hear how he came face to face with death on different occasions with the people and friends around him – also thinking he was going to die as lightning struck around him in a violent storm. Staring into eternity frightened

Martin – he realized how fleeting his time in this world is compared to the world to come. So, he wanted to make sure that he was well prepared for the life to come. Because of this he gave up his father’s hopes that he would be a well-to-do lawyer and he entered a monastery – in order to make himself right with God.

Later in life Luther said: *“If only as a youth, I would have known even one little word of the Gospel – how rich and happy I would have been!”* But no one pointed out to him the clear teaching of the Bible that **“man is not justified in the sight of God by the works of the Law...But Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law.”** (Galatians 3:11,13) Instead, in ignorance, Luther and many others of his day (and still today!) continue in the delusion that we have to make ourselves right with God by what WE do!

Again, how blessed we are – and our teenagers are – that we don’t have the same experience as Luther – In our confirmation classes, in our Bible Studies, in the Christian high school and college educations we have access to, as our teens and all of us have access to the Word and Sacraments here at church, we should be thankful that we know: **“Christ suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”** (1 Peter 3:18) Or as Paul says: **“Jesus was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** (Romans 4:25-5:1). This is a message of comfort that makes us gratefully rejoice! – a message that we will proclaim and preserve!

In 1512 Martin Luther the priest was sent on official church business to the so-called “Holy City” of Rome! A place filled with churches and shrines – the home of the Pope himself, who claimed (and still claims) to be the Lord of all Christendom and the Vicar of Christ on earth! Luther was excited to go to Rome – hoping for a chance to busy himself visiting the shrines, venerating holy objects, celebrating masses – he was hoping to earn for himself and his family remissions, peace with God, and eternal life. But the more he pursued these things, the more disappointed he became. He saw the crass materialism of the city, the immorality of the priests and the people, the rote, cold, meaninglessness of the rites and ceremonies being performed. He saw inconsistencies and hypocrisy that sickened him! He returned from Rome in dismay, disappointed, and cynical – so much so that he was ready to give up – if it weren’t for a verse he found in his Bible: St. Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk in Romans 1:17, **“The just shall live by faith!”**

How precious this verse was to Luther in that dark time – it was like a light bulb went on over his head. **“BY FAITH!”** Faith in Jesus! – NOT in Rome, or the Pope, or the saints; NOT by one’s own piety, prayers, or devotions. As Paul put it so plainly in Galatians 2:16: **“Man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.”** May this “light bulb” continue to shine over our heads! KNOW that God justifies YOU! He takes your sins away from you – He delivers to you what Jesus won with His holy perfect life of righteousness – He takes your sins and pays for them all upon the

cross – He proclaims to you that you can be certain of possessing righteousness – that you are **JUST** – proven by the empty tomb and risen-from-the-dead Lord Jesus, on Easter!

Five years after Rome – now knowing and applying that comforting Gospel message – Luther posted his 95 Theses. He posted them in protest to the abuses within the church that attacked the Gospel message. In these theses, he especially opposed the sale of indulgences – which the people believed would free them of their sins and guilt!

Luther knew that salvation wasn't something that could be bought or sold! No one had the right to hijack the Gospel and try to use it for their own selfish, personal gain! As Peter wrote: **"You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold...but with the precious blood of Christ."** (1 Peter 1:18-19) Luther knew that our eternal comfort does not come with a price-tag that we have to pay – instead, God freely gives it to those who simply trust in Him – who have faith in Him!

And please understand that faith itself is not something WE DO – as we profess in the Catechism: *"I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith!"* Faith is simply the hand that receives the gift. When you are given a gift do you thank and praise your hand for holding that gift?! NO. Your gratitude goes to the giver of the gift....Our gratitude isn't ever directed to our own faith, but to the Heavenly Giver of the gift!

There are some who would object by saying that we make God's salvation too cheap and easy. If it comes freely, what would make anyone strive to be better or be a good person? How would you respond to this? If salvation is not dependent on our own good efforts and works, does this mean that we are free to go and continue in sin?!

What about Luther? What did the Gospel realization that came from our verse: **"The just shall live by faith,"** do for Luther? Did it cause him to go flying off the rails in evil sinfulness?! Did Martin become a materialistic, worthless, hypocrite? Just the opposite actually. We see that Luther was noble and virtuous. Certainly, he had his faults and sins – he was the first to admit them! But Dear Friends, all the heroes of the faith have had their flaws, faults, and sins. They were all in need of God's salvation – which came by **Faith**. As the Bible says: **"Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."** (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3) In other words, Abraham was righteous before God because he had faith in God! Did Abraham or David or Paul – all of whom struggled with sins, but then rejoiced to know the Gospel Message – that God freely forgave them their sins – did they go off in unrepentant sin?! NO WAY! All of these individuals became even more dedicated to God – they LOVED God, because they knew how much God first of all Loved them!

The same was true for Luther – it should be true for us! Knowing God’s Love for us, we can be dedicated to God, not because we are forced to, or threatened, or frightened into doing so – but because we actually Love God back! It is by first of all knowing the great Love that God has for US that inspires Christians into heroic acts of faith! Like Luther – it was only because he was absolutely confident of having God’s Love and forgiveness that he risked everything, standing before the world, proclaiming: *“I cannot submit to anything except to the clear Word of God...Therefore here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me!”* We see in Luther (and in many other cases) how energizing and powerful the Gospel is when it is at work moving people’s hearts!

Luther once explained what kept him going – a mantra he continued to tell himself: *“Jesus Christ is come into the world to save me, a lost sinner! Glory be to Him!”* This should be first in our hearts too! It is what motivates and moves us! Understanding how lost we *should* be because of our sins, but seeing the blessings that God has freely handed over to us moves us to joyous gratitude! Knowing what God has given to us through Jesus by Faith, how can we NOT let praises fly from our lips – how can it NOT be reflected in all sorts of different ways throughout our lives?! Knowing the free Love of God that comes to us by faith is what motivates us to go against the flow – to be different from the sinful world – and to instead seek to remain in God’s word!

On February 18th, 1546, Luther was away from home on church business, when He fell suddenly ill. As he lay on his bed dying, he remained rooted in that message of Romans 1:17: **“The just shall live by faith.”** It was rock for Luther. This was reflected in the prayer he prayed on his deathbed: *“O my Dear Father in Heaven, I thank You that You have revealed to me Your Son, Jesus Christ, in whom I believe!”*

What a difference we see in Luther before and after he came to appreciate this precious Gospel verse! And what a change it makes for us in our lives! What COMFORT we have in our hands as we take up God’s Word; upon our heads as we are Baptized; upon our lips and tongue in the Lord’s Supper. The **righteousness of Christ Jesus** comes to those who believe in Him! This is what we always cling to – it gives us confidence throughout our lives and as we face our own deaths. We have the Gospel Truth: **“Whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life!”** (John 3:16) Or as we hear again in Romans 1:17: **“The just shall live by faith.”** Yes, this is **The Verse that Made Martin Luther... And it continues still to Make US!** Making us God’s forgiven, righteous people, who have eternal life. **Glory be to God! Amen!**

Please Rise: May the Peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, Amen.

We continue with the Prayer of the Church.