

**“Therefore...”**

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).*

“Therefore...” This is how today’s reading from Romans begins. It’s important to note this because when a reading starts with the word, “therefore” you know that you have joined a conversation that is already underway. “Therefore” presumes an understanding of what has come before, and even though Paul summarizes his premise when he tells us that we have been “justified by faith,” you have to know the background to truly grasp the meaning of Paul’s teaching in today’s text.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith,” is a statement that sits at the core of the Christian message. And when we hit the rewind button on Romans, we find a foundational framework that lays out our predicament before God in frightening fashion. In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul builds a case against humanity that leaves us condemned in our sin and without hope. First, Paul warns us that, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Then Paul’s indictment becomes more pointed by telling us that we have no excuse to offer God because the law is written on our hearts and our conscience also bears witness to our sin (Romans 2:1, 18). And if these words aren’t damning enough, Paul removes any doubt about our guilt when he writes, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12). These three chapters paint us into a corner of condemnation that leaves us trapped in our sin with no way out.

Our liturgy captures a sense of Paul’s pronouncement as we admit in our confession that we are poor, miserable sinners who deserve punishment, and yet, as comprehensive as this convicting language sounds, we are constantly looking for loopholes. We tell ourselves that we aren’t all that bad and that by comparison we are way better than the people around us, and at every turn, our sinful heart – our Old Adam – tries to justify itself rather than admit the terrifying truth that we are lost.

A few years ago, I experienced the power of the Old Adam firsthand. I was visiting a man who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was in his last days. While baptized as a child, he had lived a seedy and selfish life and he hadn’t stepped into a church building in decades. At the urging of his parents, he agreed to let me visit. As we talked, he recounted his poor decisions, he voiced regret for the wrongs he had wrought on others, and he spoke as a man who was facing the end and struggling with the fact of his sin. After listening to his lament, I told him that the guilt he was feeling was true for every single one of us, and that, in Christ Jesus, God has forgiven us and promised us life. I could see that he was still struggling, so I suggested that we go through a brief service of confession and absolution. He agreed, so I walked him through a series of questions based on the very same confession of sin we often use in worship.

I began, “Do you confess to almighty God that you are a poor, miserable sinner? If so, please answer, ‘Yes’.” My new friend paused, and then, as his head began to slowly nod in agreement, he answered, “Yes.” I continued. “Do you confess to our merciful Father that you have sinned against Him in thought, word, and deed? If so, please answer, ‘Yes’.” Again, with fallen eyes, he answered my question with a broken, “Yes.” And I went on. “Do you confess to God, that because of your sin, you deserve His temporal and eternal punishment? And without a hint of hesitation, the dying man quickly looked up at me and said, “Well now, wait a minute, I wasn’t that bad!”

And there it was. The Old Adam had reared His self-justifying head. It's one thing to admit you've done something wrong, but it's another thing to agree to the death sentence that God's Law demands of even the smallest and most common sin. The Old Adam speaks – not only to minimize sin – but also to avoid its consequences. And that is exactly what we see in today's Gospel reading.

Here, Jesus speaks about His suffering and death. Mark writes, “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.” In a very straightforward way, Jesus told His disciples the awful truth about what He would face in Jerusalem because of our sin. And the Old Adam inside of Peter wouldn't hear of it. Instead, Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to “rebuke” him. The same disciple who, earlier in the reading, made a bold confession that Jesus was “the Christ” now began to correct His thinking.

The arrogance of Peter's reprimand is hard to imagine, but the truth is, that Peter's aversion to suffering is exactly the way we would have responded as well. The terrible truth is that because of the sin we have inherited – and because of the sin that we ourselves have committed since – we will suffer, and, in this life, we will fail. We will let others down. We will be cruel. We will struggle in our relationships. And ultimately, and unavoidably, we will all face death. These are realities that touch every single human being. They cannot be avoided! They cannot be denied! And that is exactly why Jesus rebuked Peter.

Peter wants Jesus to be a Savior without suffering and a Christ without a cross, but you see there are no shortcuts. Sin must be punished! It must be dealt with and we cannot do it on our own. In today's reading, Jesus asks the question, “what can a man give in return for his soul?” And the resounding answer from God's Word to this ultimate question is “nothing!” There is nothing we can give. There is nothing we can do. And that is why Jesus came.

We are here today because the life-giving, lifesaving truth of Lent is that Christ has done it for us! The punishment that we deserve has already been given – that is what the cross means! There, the Son of God exchanged the power of divine glory for the weakness of human flesh. There He exchanged His righteousness for our wickedness. There He exchanged His innocence for our guilt. There Jesus Christ exchanged His life for the death we deserved and there, on the cross, He became sin for us. Jesus did these things for us, not because we deserved it, not because we earned it, but because He loved us! As Paul writes: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners (and enemies of God), Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). And, because Christ chose the cross for us, our sins, therefore, have been forgiven. And therefore, we have life. Therefore, have peace we God, therefore, heaven is ours, and therefore, we can now carry our own crosses as His followers in this world and we can rejoice – even in our suffering – because we know how the story ends.

I continued to visit my dying friend and, in addition to helping him understand the weight and wages of sin, I was also able to deliver forgiveness in the stead and by the command of Christ, and, my friends, this is always the job of the Church. Whether it comes from the pulpit or at the bedside of a dying brother or in the restoring word of grace you speak to your spouse, or your child, or your co-worker. When forgiveness is delivered, faith is created, fear is removed, peace is granted, life is guaranteed, and we have a hope in Christ Jesus that will never put us to shame. Therefore, go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, “Amen.”

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