

Reconciling the World

2 Corinthians 5: 17-6:2

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Reformation Sunday, Oct. 29, AD 2017
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

On Tuesday we celebrate revolution. We mark 500 years of rediscovering the radical grace of the gospel. Around the world, people will give thanks for a young, obscure theologian in an insignificant town in Germany who set the world ablaze. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a copy of his 95 theological challenges to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This was the crystallizing moment for a movement that had been growing around Europe. For a hundred years, the Bible had been translated into the languages everyday people could understand. Reading the Scriptures in plain language was kindling a fire in the hearts that maybe Jesus Christ is different than the medieval church had said he was. Maybe there could be some freedom from the relentless cycle of sin, confession, penance and the purchasing of so-called indulgences to reduce one's punishment for sin.

Luther did not come to his revolutionary conclusion easily. He spent years haunted by a question, "How do you get right with God?" He knew the truth: there is a gap between us and God. There is rift between a holy God and sinful humanity. We are in a perilous condition. How can we close the gap and be made right? Luther spent years trying to close the gap by living righteously. He tried to merit God's favor through his devotion as a monk. He confessed his sins so exhaustively, to the minutest detail, that he wore out his confessor. He followed the rule of the monastery with great devotion. And still he felt condemned. No matter how hard he worked at being good, he could not get a sense that he was loved and accepted by God. Luther wrote,

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...

In those days, Luther meditated constantly on Romans 1:17 which says "He who through faith is righteous shall live." The verse kept daunting him because it seemed to mean that he himself had to be righteous in order to relate to God in faith. And he just wasn't righteous in himself. You know how it is if you think someone is always judging you: you resent them. So Luther grew to hate the righteous God who seemed

to be standing against him, always condemning him. Yet this verse also haunted him. He wanted to be righteous. The righteous live by faith. How could he do that? One day, as he meditated on this verse it struck him that righteousness is not something that comes from us. Righteousness is a gift from God that we receive by faith. We don't work up right standing before God. God gives us *his own* righteousness through Christ. When he grasped that, Luther felt that he was "altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."¹

Luther's break through was realizing that God gives to us *Christ's own* righteousness. We cannot make ourselves right with God. His grace comes from outside of us in Christ's life, death and resurrection. When we turn to Christ in faith, we are joined to him and receive all that Christ has. Luther called it an "alien righteousness."² It is not native to us. It's a gift. Only Jesus Christ is a man righteous before God. By faith, we rely on Jesus not ourselves. "The righteous shall live by faith" means that we receive by faith the righteousness of Christ with which God clothes us. It changed everything for Luther.

God gives us the righteousness of Christ. For no other reason than that he loves us. We do nothing to earn it, buy it, or deserve it. We just receive it by faith. The whole system of confession and penance in order to wipe out sins was a lie. The whole economics of purchasing credits of merit from the treasure of Christ was a lie. The whole idea that I through the sacraments of the church earn enough credit for God was a lie. Justification before God is credited to me by God's free gift of grace in Christ. I look away from myself to Christ alone. This was a revolution in spiritual freedom. I can stand before God when I come clothed in the righteousness of Christ my savior. Faith means agreeing that he alone is the savior. I can't save myself.

This is still great news. It's still revolutionary. We may not be under the thumb of the medieval church. But we still try to get by on stories of achievement, accounts of right actions, and the hope that we might be worthy in ourselves. We don't want to be helpless before God. We are a congregation of doers. We went to school. We earn a living. We help people. We get stuff done. We make communities work. We create laws for the good and we are law abiding. We're givers not takers. And people give us commendations, money, even plaques for being good people. Now it's a great thing to live successfully and purposefully and constructively. But it is not enough in itself to overcome our deepest problem. We are sinners. Luther himself described it as being in-curved. The human heart is so curved in on itself that we cannot open towards God in love and obedience. No amount of good can overcome the gap we know exists between us and our Creator. We don't need a patch to help us be a bit better. We need a revolution in our hearts.

That's what our passage this morning is getting at. Paul is giving us the heart of the gospel. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not getting their trespasses against them."

We were made for God. We were made to be in relationship to him. Connected to him, we become what we were meant to be. But apart from him we have no good. Nothing works without being connected to God. God seeks to relate to his creatures. But we have turned away. We've gone on the run. We want to be our own gods. We want to be self-sufficient and the determiners of our own lives. And so we take a hostile posture against God. We think he wants to take away life from us, to rob us of pleasure and make us drones. We are estranged from the God who created us for a life of love and intimacy with himself.

But God determined to cross the gap between us. "God was in Christ" says Paul. He came to reconcile the hostile, broken, hiding, hurting world to himself. He made the first move. As Paul wrote elsewhere, "God shows his great love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son" (Rom. 5: 8-9). Before we had anything to do about it, God created the grounds for reconciliation. Hostilities existed between the Creator God and the human beings he had made in his image. We were in a state of estrangement. But God cleared away the impediment. He reopened the channels of communication. He moved all grounds for estrangement.

How? Paul says in our passage, "He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (5: 20 NASB). Luther called this the great exchange. Jesus took our place so he could give us his place. He went to the place where all sin leads, to death and estrangement from God, to ultimate loneliness and suffering. He took the sins of the hostile, guilty world upon himself. He became our substitute taking the consequence and penalty of rebellion against God as his own. He did this in order to give us his righteousness. He gives us his right standing before his Father. He gives us his heart to love his Father. God got reconciled to us. Because the Father sent the Son and the Son went willingly to become the righteous man on our behalf. And to take the position of the unrighteous man condemned for sin he did not commit but accepts on our behalf.

This wonderful exchange is the great mystery of grace. It means that everything is in relation to Christ. I live from him. I get his righteousness. It comes from outside of me. I am always dependent on Christ. I never again am just me on my own doing my own thing—which, after all is the definition of hell. Rather, into

eternity I am always going to be living from Christ. I get moved from alone to being “in Christ,” and that makes everything new. God has forgiven our sins in Christ. He is reconciled to us. There are no more grounds for hostility.

And so Paul says, “We are ambassadors for this Savior. God is making his appeal through us. We beg you. With all our hearts we urge you. Be reconciled to God. God is reconciled to you. Be reconciled to God.

This is the response of faith. The gospel tells us, “All is forgiven. Come home.” God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. The way is clear. The door is open. His arms are outstretched wide. God is not angry at you. He just wants you home. Come home, all is forgiven.”

Rhonda and I get to see our dear friends Parker and Patty Williamson far less than we would like. Now that we live so far away, our visits are few but precious. I always love driving up the long, steep hill of their driveway. I feel like I’m leaving all cares behind as I go up that road. When we get out of the car, Patty and Parker come rushing out to meet us with smiles and hugs. But before long, Parker will say merrily, “Dawson, get in this house!” Don’t just stand out here in the drive way. There’s more. Come in. Come in to where we live. Sit by the fire. I’ll bring you a drink. I’ll bring you food. Come sit down. Let’s talk. You’re safe here. You’re loved here. There’s so much to catch up on. Get in this house!”

That’s the gospel word this morning. Get in this house. God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. Come home. All is forgiven. Don’t stay outside the house wondering whether or not you want to come in. Don’t stay outside eating the beanie weenies of your own choices when a feast awaits you. Don’t stay in the cold hut of your pride when the warm life of God’s mansion stands open. Get in the house.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting their trespasses against them. So we beg you, we urge you, we plead with you: be reconciled to God. Look away from yourself to Jesus. Once for all for salvation. Every hour of every day for life in Christ, for growth in becoming all he made you to be. Leave off yourself and come home to Jesus.

This is the revolution that Martin Luther discovered. Being made right with God has been accomplished by Christ Jesus on our behalf. We access that gift by relying on Christ alone. It involves a certain kind of surrender. I give up trying to make life work on my own. It involves the end of a certain kind of pride. God I can’t make it without you. It demands leaving off all those stories we tell the world of why we’re ok and all we’ve done. Lord Jesus, I have only filthy rags. All my goodness is

just soiled garments. Would you dress me in the shimmering robe of your righteousness? Would you dress me in your salvation so that I might come before your Father in freedom and joy?

This is the revolutionary news. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Will you let yourself be saved? Will you surrender whatever you are holding onto that is keeping you from being reconciled to God? Will you let go of what you think is giving you life but is actually just death, just crumbs, just a rotting piece of pride or indulgence or addiction or lust or greed?

I can't make you come home to the God who has made his home with you. I can only speak on his behalf. There's no other way home than through Jesus Christ. There is forgiveness only in Christ. There is no other name under heaven given by which people may be saved. And there may be no other moment than now. Paul wrote so passionately, "Behold, *now* is the favorable time. Behold *now* is the day of salvation."

You can't earn it, manipulate it, manufacture it or buy it. You can only receive it. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Is he stirring you now? Is he recreating life in you this moment? Do you see him waiting in the doorway with arms open wide? Do you see him smiling and shouting out your name, "Get in this house!" Go now. Do it today. Accept Jesus in faith. Surrender your heart. Accept his invitation and say like the old hymn, "I come! Just as I am without one plea, O Lamb of God, I come to thee. I come."

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/MartinLutherConversion.pdf>

² <http://www.mcm.edu/~eppleyd/luther.html>