

Reformation Sunday  
October 30, 2005  
Romans 3.19-28  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

I recently heard how a man was brought into a local emergency room, after having been seriously injured in an accident. As the trauma docs worked on him, a friend of his anxiously awaited word about his condition. Someone invited the friend to pray. He answered, "I can't. I'd be a hypocrite. I haven't prayed in years. I can't go to God now, out of the blue, just because I need something."

That poor guy thought he didn't have enough brownie points to cash in. He thought God was like a Foodtown checker, who's not allowed to let you carry away a free roasted chicken unless you can prove you've saved up 5,000 S&H green points. He thought he hadn't paid his dues so he couldn't belong to the club and get the benefits of membership. He thought God's into tit-for-tat calculations, constantly weighing whether we **deserve** what we pray for.

He was a good friend, caring deeply whether the patient would live or die, but he was a bad theologian, a sadly misinformed Christian. He thought the prodigal son's older brother had a point when he pouted that his young scalawag brother hadn't earned a whit of their father's love, yet seemed to be getting the lion's share of it. He thought the vineyard laborers who began work at 9 a.m. and didn't stop till quitting time should file a class action suit to protest the fact that the bums who arrived so late that the blistering sun had already begun to go down, inexplicably and dishearteningly received the same daily wage that they did. He thought it was a travesty that our Lord Jesus looked in love at the thief hanging beside Him on Calvary and promised **him** Paradise. He thought the

Prodigal Son, the tardy workers in the vineyard, the good thief hadn't **earned** their **reward**. He was right. **None** of them had.

Isn't that the point of the Gospel, though? God doesn't pass out rewards. God gives gifts. The guy in the ER waiting room didn't "get it" because he didn't "get" grace. Since **he'd** ignored God all those years, he expected that **God** would ignore him, too. He was thinking of how **humans** react. For some reason, he didn't have much of a clue about how **God** acts.

This weekend we Lutheran Christians celebrate Reformation. We remember how **Martin Luther** didn't "get it" for a long time, either. For years (back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) Martin Luther was a tortured man and an unhappy monk. He didn't want God to ignore him or even worse to damn him, so he worked 24/7 to **earn** the **reward** of forgiveness and to drum up internal confidence that heaven and not hell awaited him.

Martin Luther performed penance to beat the band. He fasted from food, he spent sleepless nights in prayer, when he **did** sleep it was on a cold floor, he whipped himself till he drew blood, he spent hours in the confessional, laying out his sins in such minute detail that his confessor, Johann Staupitz, was known to hide when he saw Martin coming. He is also reported to have said to Martin in pure exasperation, "Look, don't waste my time with these little peccadilloes! If you're going to confess a sin, let it be a big one, like killing your mother!"

Staupitz remained an Augustinian monk lifelong, never leaving the Roman Catholic church, but God used him as a powerful channel of grace in Luther's life and therefore in ours. It was he who commanded Luther to go to university and study to become a Scripture scholar. He said, "Martin, God is not angry with you, you are angry

with God!” He believed that Luther would finally encounter God’s love if he immersed himself in God’s Word. He was right.

It was ultimately in the Psalms and in the writings of St. Paul that Martin Luther came to realize he could **never** earn God’s love and that he didn’t **have** to, for, in the words of today’s epistle,

... we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (Romans 3.28)

Faith is trust that God in Jesus Christ has done everything necessary for our salvation. Nothing **good** we do is going to **add** to the salvation won for us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing **bad** we do is going to **subtract** from it. Salvation is an outright gift, already given. God’s response to our faithlessness is faithfulness. God’s response to our sin is pardon. God’s response to the mess we make of our lives is heaven.

Even as that fellow in the waiting room was explaining why prayer was not a viable option for him, God received his faulty reasoning **as** a prayer. Even as he imagined God’s rejection of his plea, God was accepting him, as Billy Graham loves to sing, “Just as I am, without one plea, except for the blood of Jesus shed for me.”

None of us is a perfect Christian. No one can catalog our faults more fully than we can ourselves. St. Paul would say: the **truth** is that our best isn’t that much better than our worst,

....since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3.23)

Whether today you feel more like the prodigal son or the older brother, the exhausted laborer who’s put in a full day of work or the self-conscious guy who hardly broke a sweat and walked away with a fat paycheck; whether you are the person who worships

once in a great while or the one who comes early to make the coffee or stays late to clean the altar; whether you devote yourself weekly to teaching a class-full of our cherished children or can't remember the last time you volunteered to do anything; God loves you.

The Good News we've come to hear and that we go forth to embody is that:

"...[we] are now justified by his grace as a gift...." (Romans 3.24)

Let it sink in. Celebrate it. Thank God for it. Do a dance. Sing a song. Marvel at the goodness of God. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson