

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing – Romans 3:19

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all your many blessings upon us, especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ, who, through his life, death and resurrection here on this earth, has revealed to us the nature of your love, the forgiveness of our sins, and the assurance of life eternal in your heavenly kingdom. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, increase in us an appreciation for your redeeming grace, and a desire to walk humbly in relationship with you as disciples of Christ. Amen.

I would like to begin my message this morning by sharing with you a story that was told by Pastor Tim Zingale, to illustrate his sermon entitled, Saved by Grace Through Faith.

“There once was a boy named Roy, who desperately wanted love and attention from his parents, but he really didn’t know how to receive it. As a result, Roy got into a lot of trouble. He found that he got plenty of attention from his parents for all the trouble that he caused, which seemed close enough to love for a ten-year old boy.

Every time he got into trouble, his parents would question him long and hard, trying to find out his reasons for the way he acted. ‘Why did you do that, Roy? What’s wrong?’ they would ask. But Roy would just stare at the floor, not answering, not looking at his parents. Finally, his parents would say, ‘You know we will have to punish you for this.’

Roy knew this, and was expecting it. He was familiar with punishment and knew how to cope with it. There would be no TV, no dessert after supper, and he would have to stay home after school for a few weeks. Roy never seemed to mind the punishment. It was just a part of getting his parents attention.

One night, Roy’s parents received a phone call from the police. The officer informed them that Roy and some other boys had vandalized the school. They had been caught in the midst of trying to set a fire in one of the classrooms. Roy’s parents rushed to the police station, and talked to the lieutenant in charge for over an hour. Finally, Roy was released into their custody, after they had agreed to help pay for the damages.

The ride home from the police station was silent. Roy sat between his parents in the front seat, waiting, but no one spoke. When they got home, Roy went to his room and waited for his parent’s usual lecture and the terms of the punishment. Finally, his mother came in, looked at Roy, and said simply, ‘You’ve really hurt us tonight.’ Then she left the room.

Later, Roy’s father came into his room and asked , ‘Roy, do you have homework to do.’ The question took him by surprise. ‘What? Uh, yes, I guess so.’ ‘Well, you’d better get it done.’ Then his dad left the room, leaving Roy staring at his book, wondering what was wrong. At bedtime, his parents came in again. They brought him a snack, and told him that when he had finished eating, he needed to turn out the lights and get some sleep. Then they left, without saying another word.

Roy ate his snack, turned out the lights, and laid on his bed for nearly an hour, but he couldn't sleep. Finally, he jumped up, ran out his room, down the stairs and jumped into his mommy's lap, crying his heart out. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I've been so bad. Please forgive me."

Roy's parents held him for a long time, shedding a few tears of their own. Out poured all the years of hurt, the need of love and attention, as his parents told him over and over again how much they loved him, in spite of all the things that he had done to disappoint them. That night, Roy finally learned to receive the love and forgiveness his parents felt for him."

I think many of us can relate to this story. I know I can. As I think back over my childhood, there have been numerous times that I have done things that I knew were wrong, and I know had to have hurt my parents. And I have known their forgiveness, their love for me, as I expressed my sorrow for my actions.

But more importantly, I believe this story expresses the dynamic of the struggle that Luther encountered, which led to his discovering the truth of the Gospel, and the Reformation of the church, which we celebrate today.

Luther was a lot like Roy. Even though he had devoted his life to serving God and the church, he had a hard time receiving and understanding the love of God in his own life. Luther knew God's commandments. Luther knew what was expected of him. And Luther knew that he had often failed to live his life as God expected.

Although Luther desperately sought the love and forgiveness of God, his thoughts were focused on the punishment that he deserved for his failure to live according to God's will for his life. As a result, he felt unworthy to be a servant of God, and the love and forgiveness he sought, evaded him.

Then, as did Roy, Luther came to experience unmerited, forgiving love. In his study of Scripture, Luther came to our passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, and through the power of God's Holy Spirit, it opened his heart to be able to receive the grace of God, and changed his life forever.

Listen again to the Gospel, as Paul presents it to us in the reading today: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; [we] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, to be received by faith. For we hold that a person is justified [which means forgiven and set right with God] by faith apart from works of the law."

And like Roy, these words of Scripture, led Luther to experience the unmerited and forgiving love of God, they opened his heart to glorify God, and in humbleness, repent of his sins. But Luther didn't do so in order to gain God's attention, or to earn God's love, but he did so in response to love he had already come to receive through Christ's death and resurrection. Luther once said, "We find no rest for our weary bones unless we cling to the word of grace."

This brings us to the main thing or heart of the Reformation message. In a scene from the movie *Martin Luther: Heretic*, Luther, as a professor at the University of Wittenberg, is depicted leading a class in theology, teaching his students about the meaning of repentance. Luther points out this word has, as its Greek meaning, “to change your mind.” Thus, Luther concludes, “Repentance is not our action, but an inward transformation of the mind and heart, which results from God’s Spirit working in us to enable us to respond to His love for us.”

One of Luther’s students objects. “Do you mean to tell me that we don’t have to do anything to be a Christian, just believe in our hearts?” “Yes,” says Luther, “We don’t have to do anything.”

Another student then presses the issue, by asking, “Are you telling us that we can do anything that we want?” Again, Luther agrees, but then he adds, “But what do you want to do?” Luther’s point was clear. If we have experienced the forgiving love of God in Jesus the Christ, if we have come to realize that God has made us his own children through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, “what should we want to do?”

There is nothing that we can do to earn God’s unmerited, forgiving love. It is a gift that we do not deserve. It comes from the very heart of God. Luther called the doctrine of justification the chief article of the whole Christian doctrine – It is salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is the main thing of the Lutheran Church, the material principle upon which all other teachings rest.

Yet to experience God’s love also leads to a renewal of our hearts and minds, and to find a faithful way to express our gratitude for God’s grace. So, how do we respond to the gift of grace and love given us through the cross of Jesus Christ and by His empty tomb?

Listen to what Luther said in two of his thesis he had nailed to the door of the church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517: # 62 – **“The treasure of the church should be the Gospels and the grace of God.”** # 94 – **“Christians must follow Christ at all cost.”**

Listen to what is asked of us in the rite of confirmation, or the Affirmation of Baptism found in our Lutheran Service Book. In this rite, we declare our intent to remain in the covenant God made with us in baptism by: 1) living among God’s faithful people; 2) hearing God’s word and sharing in Christ’s holy supper; 3) proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; 4) serving all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and; striving for justice and peace in all the earth.

It is to these ends, that God would have us respond to his love for us. But even though we sometimes fail to respond to God’s grace in these ways, God’s Spirit continues to assure us of his love, and to open our hearts to the newness of life given us freely in Christ our Lord. Let us always keep the main thing (the love of God in Christ) the main thing. Amen.