

Romans 3:19-28 *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. 21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. 28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Your family knows you—perhaps too well! They might know you better than you know yourself. That's one of the great things about being with your family. You don't have to pretend. You don't have to hide things. You can be yourself and in a healthy family they love you anyway. They know all of your strengths and good qualities. They also know all of your warts and weaknesses. They know the good things that you've done for others over the years and they know all the bad things and mistakes you've made. And they love you anyway! When you are around your family, you are free to be yourself. You have the comfort of knowing that your family loves you and will accept you for who you are...warts and all.

When we are out in the public, that's a different story. When we are out in public, we like to put on airs. We pretend that we are different or better than we really are. We do all we can to hide our faults and failings. We are afraid that if our employer knew our secrets, we'd get our walking papers very quickly. We are afraid that if our neighbors knew all of our personal issues they would consider moving away. We don't always feel free to be ourselves because we are afraid of what others might think about us. We see them and all the good things about them and start to feel bad because we know the truth about ourselves and it doesn't match what we see in them. We forget that they might be hiding their faults and shortcomings from us too trying to pretend that everything is alright when deep down inside it is not. When we are out in public, we don't always feel free to be ourselves. We know that in a healthy family, people will love us in spite of our faults. Out in the public we aren't so sure of that.

Martin Luther was well aware of the fact that his heavenly Father knew all about him. That's the problem Luther had. He was certain his heavenly Father knew all about his weaknesses and shortcomings. He knew his heavenly Father was all too well aware of the sins that he committed. That's what terrified him about God. He only viewed God as a terrifying taskmaster who demanded perfection of him and threatened punishment for any imperfection. Luther's problem is that he started out with the wrong suppositions and because of this viewed the righteousness of God from the wrong perspective. The church of Luther's day taught "synteresis." This is the concept that there is a spark of goodness that exists in everyone. This supposed spark of goodness is what gives everyone the ability to earn favor before God. The thought is that God got you started by putting this spark of good in you. Now you need to do the rest by the way you live. Righteousness and salvation was something then that needed to be earned. But try as hard as he could, Luther found that at best, he was capable of only a partial and weak faith that was not good enough to meet God's demands. Luther had an unforgiving conscience that told him no matter what he tried to do and no matter how much he tried to get rid of sin, his balance sheet always showed a deficit before God. Luther realized not only that he had done wrong things to sin against God, but the motives and thoughts behind what he did were wrong too. This is what was so terrifying for Luther. He realized that he was selfish and sinful right to his very core.

Luther understood well what Paul shares with us here in this text, "*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law.... There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" He didn't want to be himself because he knew that being himself before God meant God's eternal punishment for his sins. There's nothing worse than being in a house where you know you do not have the approval of the owner. It's uncomfortable. You're always waiting for the hammer to drop. That's how Luther felt before God. He was more than uncomfortable. He was terrified. He knew that there was no one who does good before God...not even himself. This is what drove him in his search for the truth.

We know all too well this feeling of terror before God. We aren't always that comfortable before God or in his house either. We know all too well the guilt and shame that come with our sin. We know the uncomfortable feeling of having to admit our sin to God and others. We are well aware how far short we have fallen of the perfection God expects of us. We want to go out and be ourselves...but we know that by nature, we fall far short of what God expects of us in the lives we live. No matter how hard we try to live up to the expectations God has of us we can't do it. So often we try to hide our faults, as if God doesn't know that they are there. We convince ourselves that as long as we do more good than others around us we'll be just fine before God. We put on airs and try to console ourselves that we can live however we want and do whatever we please and God will be accepting of us anyway. But that doesn't soothe our troubled consciences very well. In the end, we still stand before God with sin in our account. When we try to hide behind our own solution to this problem of sin, we find nothing but terror and despair.

When you admit to your family what you've done when you've done something wrong, they may be upset and disappointed, but in a healthy family your family will rally around you, love you anyway and do what they can to help see you through the situation you've gotten yourself into. The same is true with our heavenly Father. He isn't happy with our sin nor does he approve of our sin. But he doesn't throw us away because of our sin or destroy us either. Instead, he acted to change our status before him and the way he sees us so that we can live with him forever. What brought Luther peace is that he began to understand that when scripture talks about the righteousness of God, it is not here talking about the righteousness which God demands of us. Rather it is talking about

the righteousness that God gives to us because of Jesus. This is a righteousness or a perfection which doesn't come because of our works or because we follow God's law. It is a righteousness that comes to us because of God's grace and through faith in Jesus. All the law does is testify that we are sinners, lost and condemned creatures. The gospel testifies that while we are not perfect, Jesus was. And his perfect sacrifice on Calvary's cross satisfied God's need for justice because of our sins. So Paul could rightly say that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory which God demands of us. He could also rightly say that all are justified (or declared not guilty) because of the redemption which came by Christ Jesus.

Here's the wonderful truth about our heavenly Father and our spiritual family. We were born outside of God's family as God's enemies. Yet God's grace, his undeserved love, led him to make salvation possible through Jesus and then reach out to us to bring us to faith and adopt us into his family. God didn't pretend that we weren't broken when he adopted us into his family. He knew exactly who we were. With many adoptions today, people look for just the right child to adopt. They don't want one with any physical problems or issues. They want to choose the perfect baby to adopt and so they search and search until they find just the right one. They look past those with physical issues or who came from horrible family situations which might lead to emotional problems down the road and try to choose the perfect baby to bring into their home. God didn't do that with us. He took us as we were...warts, weaknesses and all. He didn't ignore who we were or what our status was before him. He made it possible for him to view us differently. He sent Jesus to this world to be our Savior. The blood that Jesus shed paid for our sins. When he came to us through word and sacrament he covered us with the robe of Jesus' perfection and now he sees us differently. We didn't change. God didn't change. But the way God sees us changed. Covered in the perfection of Jesus God sees us as the holy people he demands we be. Now we meet the standard of perfection God demands. God adopted us into his family.

What an awesome feeling to know that God knows us warts and all...and loves us anyway. He knows the evil thoughts we have. He knows the words that we mumble under our breath that no one else hears. He knows the deeds and actions we do when no one else is looking...and he loves us anyway! He changed our status from enemy to family. He freed us from our slavery to sin to be who he made us to be: his children. You are free to be who God made you to be: his redeemed child. This is the treasure which is ours through the Reformation. We are reminded of who God is, who he made us to be and we are freed to be who God made us to be. Our God is not the evil task master in heaven who enjoys inflicting punishment on those who disobey him. He is the loving, gracious Father who saw to our redemption and who wants nothing more than for us to live with him forever. We are no longer the enemies of God who are slaves to our sinful nature and want only to rebel against him. We are now children who are thankful for the gift of forgiveness, life and salvation which God has given to us and who want to serve him in holiness and joy now and forever. We are no longer uncomfortable when we come home to God's house. We long to come to his house to rejoice in the salvation which he has brought.

Typically, when we gather on Reformation, we not only focus our attention on the gospel brought to us through Jesus our Savior, but also on the necessity to defend and preserve the truth revealed to us in God's word. That is a huge part of the Reformation and something we want to hold to as our heritage moving forward so that we do not lose the certainty of salvation God has freely given to us. Today, we also want to focus our attention on the family we are part of now as recipients of God's grace. God brought each one of us individually into his family through faith. He did so warts and all knowing the good and the bad about us. That means we are all brothers and sisters in the same family. If we were to look closely at each other's lives, we would see similar warts, weaknesses and sins that we see in our own lives. The truth is all of us are broken. That's why we are here. We know that we are broken and that only Jesus can heal us. We want to create a family atmosphere here at God's house in which each person is free to be themselves. We don't need judging or criticizing. We don't want people to be critical of one another. We want to be people who are compassionate and loving of one another, understanding each other's weaknesses and encouraging one another to lay those before our Lord and know of his love in Jesus. We want this to be a safe place where every sinner can gather to lay their sin before God's throne and assured of his love and forgiveness. God brought us together from all sorts of different places, lives, cultures and backgrounds to walk together in this journey we call faith and to strengthen each other for the walk which lies ahead.

Being reminded of our heritage today helps to focus our attention on the family that we are as the people of God. We aren't a museum where the saints put on airs and gather to put their great and perfect lives on display for everyone to see. We are a hospital where broken sinners gather to throw their sins before the Lord and lay themselves bare to know of his healing forgiveness and love. In a couple of weeks, we are going to hold our "Welcome Home Sunday." This is a synod-wide effort to have every member of our church in worship on that day. The truth is, many of our members who haven't been here for awhile are embarrassed to come back after such a long absence. They are afraid of being judged and criticized for not being here. They feel guilty and don't want others to make their wounds bigger by exposing them. So they don't come. We want to change that. A big way we can do that is to be welcoming and loving when we see someone we haven't seen for awhile. Remembering that as sinners we are in the same boat before God because of our sins, we want to be careful what we say to that person. Don't talk about how long they've been away. Just talk about how great it is to see them. Feel free to be who God made you to be—a fellow sinner who knows the guilt and shame of your sin as well as the love of Jesus and reflect that love with them. Go out of your way to talk with them. The absolute worst thing you could do is to ignore someone who hasn't been here for awhile but decided to give it one more try. Love them, warts and all, and ask what you can do to help them as they move forward. You know what it's like to be in that person's position. Ask yourself how you would like to be treated if that were you and let that guide your actions.

Your family knows you better than you know yourself. Most importantly, your Father in heaven knows you best...and he loves you anyway. He has freed you from your sin and given you the certainty of life in heaven. You are free to be yourself and who he made you to be. Amen.