

Sermon, 6/18/2023

Romans 5:1-8

“We Have Peace With God”

This morning’s reading begins with the statement, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God...”. The idea that we are justified by faith is essentially the cornerstone of the theology of the Reformed tradition. But what exactly does it mean? In what way are we justified, and why are we in need of being justified.

To more fully understand we must go back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. As the story goes, Adam and Eve live in the beautiful Garden of Eden. They are free to eat fruit from the trees, but there is one tree that God says they are strictly restricted from eating its fruit. If they eat it they will die. It is known as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But then a sneaky serpent comes to Eve and tells her that God knows that if they eat of its fruit their eyes will be opened and they will be like God. And the serpent convinces her that if they eat it they will not die. Enticed by the fact that the fruit is a delight to the eyes she convinces Adam to eat it, which he does. (By the way, although tradition and artwork have depicted the fruit as an apple, the Bible does not say it was an apple. Not important, but just a little FYI.) Well, they do not die, but the serpent is punished, and Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden.

This is portrayed by Paul as the coming of sin into the world. As he writes further on in the fifth chapter, “sin came into the world through one man...”. This is called, in Christian tradition, the doctrine of the Fall, as well as ‘Original Sin’. To be perfectly honest with you, I do not agree with this. First, understand that this story is an allegory. It is not meant to be taken literally, but points to a particular reality of human existence. Secondly, keep in mind that Genesis, first and foremost, is a Hebrew text, and the Jews do not interpret it in terms of a fall. Whereas Christianity interprets it as a fall from innocence to sin. Jewish thought tends to see it as a movement from innocence to responsibility.

The term ‘Original Sin’ does not appear until the fourth century in the writings of Augustine, and it means more than the idea that sin came into world through one man, but that we inherited it from him - that it is existentially passed on from generation to generation. In other words, we are all sinners because of what Adam did.

Many modern thinkers, such as Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr did not accept the idea that sin is an inherited state of being, but that the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience points to the nature of sin, which is linked to human pride and willfulness that can drive us in directions contrary to the will of God. Karl Barth also saw the idea of inherited sin as undermining human responsibility. The comedian, Flip Wilson, used to say, "The devil made me do it". In the case of Original Sin, we might say, 'Adam made me do it', again, relieving ourselves from taking personal responsibility for our actions.

Although we may not accept the idea of original sin, sin remains a reality. We may not have been born sinful creatures, but we do have the propensity to do that which is contrary to what God wants of us through the choices we make - choices that arise out of our own free will. If we are taught correctly and have a healthy conscience, like Adam, after partaking of the fruit from the forbidden tree, we know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil, and must choose which is the right way to go, and we take responsibility for the choices we make, choosing to act as sinner or saint.

Now, the full opening verse from today's reading reads, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." One traditional way in which we find that peace with God is through what is called substitutional atonement - meaning that Jesus took our sinfulness upon himself and paid the cost through his death on the cross. But there are other ways as well. Through Jesus' teachings and actions, we see what God expects of us in our relationships with others and the world in general. I believe we also come to understand through Jesus that our God is a God of love, not a God of wrath. The grace that Paul speaks of is that which truly reveals to us that we are justified in God's eyes, which, I think, is one way of saying that God is accepting of our humanity, and it is through faith that we come to see and to accept the mercy and forgiveness that is our assurance that we have peace with God. Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of love, we are ever so grateful for the grace that you extend to us, wrapped as it is in mercy and forgiveness. We recognize that there are times when we think and act in ways that are displeasing to you, and we are sorry for that. Help us to walk more closely in the footsteps of your Son Jesus, acting in the ways of love, extending your peace to friend and foe alike. As we accept your gift of grace, help us to do the same in all our relationships. Bless your Holy Church, both here and abroad, that we may be a beacon of your grace and love. Today we remember those whom we call father, for all that they meant to us both in good

times and bad. For those who have passed on we are grateful that they rest in your Holy Presence - and we pray as well for those for whom this day brings sadness. May they also find comfort in you.

Tomorrow is Juneteenth in which we celebrate the end of that which has been called America's original sin - remembering those who were taken from their homes, bound in chains, robbed of their freedom and their way of life. But let us also remain aware that slavery still exists to this day but is referred to as human trafficking. We pray for those who are also taken or lured from their homes and forced to work in sweatshops and brothels. Bless them, Lord, and help them to find the freedom they also deserve and have a right to...Amen.