

Reformation Sunday 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 31, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Imagine that your phone is ringing. And you look at the caller-id to make sure it isn't spam. And the caller-id says "U.S. Department of Justice." Now I don't know about you. But if my caller-id said, "Department of Justice," I would be thinking to myself, "This cannot be good news." It could be the FBI. It could be some prosecutors or investigators or some kind of attorney. If it says, "Department of Justice," either I am in trouble. Or someone I know is in trouble. Big trouble. A phone call from the Department of Justice is not going to be a happy phone call.

If a phone call from the Department of Justice is not good news, then a message from "God's Justice" is going to be even worse news. According to Martin Luther, God's justice is at the heart of the Reformation that we are commemorating today. Martin Luther, in middle age, in his own explanations after the fact, said this was what triggered the Reformation (The Lutheran Reformation, the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic church used to call it the Protestant Rebellion): God's justice. This was the trigger of it all. This was the cause of it all. According to Luther the man himself later in life: God's justice.

And God's justice, like a phone call from the Department of Justice, is not good news. Somebody is in trouble. And it is not going to end well. Martin Luther could not understand, therefore, why the Apostle Paul was so excited about God's justice. Paul made this great statement that I want to have tattooed on my body. I want it engraved on my gravestone. *I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation.* From Romans chapter one, verse sixteen. *I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God.* What a great expression!

It is followed by these words, verse seventeen: *For the Gospel is the justice of God.* The good news is the justice of God. But how can God's justice be good news? How can a phone call from the United States Department of Justice be good news? Justice is about punishment. Do you remember what President George W. Bush said on the night of September 11, 2001? He addressed the nation in a very authoritative way. And President Bush said: *"I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them Justice is about punishment. Almost ten years later, President Barack Obama stated: "And on nights like this one, we can say to those families who have lost loved ones to al Qaeda's terror: Justice has been done."* Justice is about punishment. Deserved punishment. President Bush and President Obama agree on that one. I can completely agree with both presidents. But is this the work of Christ? Is this the meaning of the Gospel? And it seemed

clear that the Apostle Paul, in the letter to the Romans, was saying, “Yes, absolutely!” The gospel is the power of God. The gospel reveals God’s justice.

What happened next is amazing. It’s historic. And it’s amazing. And it’s nerdy. Martin Luther began to read Paul in Paul’s own language. Because Paul wrote in Greek. But most Christians were reading the Bible in Latin. Luther had an illumination. An epiphany. An “A-ha” moment. There is a cluster of inter-related terms: Just. Justice. Justification. These words are all in the New Testament. God is just. God seeks justice. God justifies Christians. It’s important to get these terms right. Martin Luther had help from the Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. Because with Erasmus and the Renaissance, scholars were going back to the original languages and to the oldest copies of the Bible. On the cover of the service folder, you will see the opening verses of Romans in what is likely the oldest extant copy of Romans, a piece of paper in a museum at Harvard. And those opening verses are in Greek, the language of the New Testament. Not Latin.

Just, justice, justification. Because of Martin Luther, and probably because of Erasmus, we use new terminology in English. *Right* and *righteous* and *righteousness*. Which we have used in English Bibles since the Reformation. When Paul spoke of the power of the Gospel, he was not talking about God’s justice. Which is what Luther and everyone had thought for about a thousand years. The Gospel does not reveal the *justice* of God. Instead, the Gospel reveals the *righteousness* of God. Perhaps a bit scary, but not as scary as justice. Because justice means punishment. But the righteousness of God refers to his holiness, his perfection, his goodness, his mercy. Which Paul is saying is what is revealed in the Gospel. Not justice. This is why the Bible, and the study of the Bible, was of such central importance in the Reformation. These sentences in Romans are about the character of God. The character of God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, or as Paul and the rest of us say, in the good news, the Gospel. Jesus and the Gospel are not bringers of God’s justice. So when the phone rings, it no longer says Justice is calling for you. It says Goodness and Truth are calling.

And that fundamentally changes how we think about God. What we actually think about the point of the Christian message. And this is a scholarly insight. This is the insight of nerds in libraries with lexicons. This is guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit at work. The Reformation insight unpacks further with these extraordinarily sophisticated and rich words of Paul: through faith for faith. Or in the words of the first Protestant translators, “from faith to faith.” And then in very important words which Paul took from an Old Testament prophet: “The righteous one will live by faith.” In these words of Paul which ought to receive deliberate study and careful consideration, we sure hear a lot about faith. Faith is the medium in which all of this happens.

Let’s consider that phone call again. The caller-id says, “department of justice.” You might be terrified that justice is coming for you. Or you might be confident that justice is coming for someone else. It depends on how well you think you are doing in God’s eyes. Luther felt that he was in trouble. Luther that neither he nor any human could ever do enough to be right with God. But not everyone felt that way. Lots of people then and now look in the mirror and see a good

and lovable person, one whom God must surely adore. Not brother Martin Luther. And when Luther achieved this insight, it undid what most human beings understand as reward for merit.

In the service folder I have added some supplementary quotations that can help you to understand the essence of Luther's insight. The first quotation is Luther's own words. The next quotation is by Heiko Oberman, the foremost Luther scholar of the last fifty years, and a member of this congregation until his death in 2001. For many of you, the most famous Oberman is his wife Toetie, which I'm sure amuses her, but for those of us who study, it is her late husband Heiko who brought vast understanding to Martin Luther. And the quotation from Heiko says this: *Reward and merit, so long undisputed as the basic motivation for all human action, were robbed of their efficacy. Good works, which Church doctrine maintained as indispensable, were deprived of their basis in* Reward and merit, Heiko was saying, which is how we raise children, is how civilization understood that God related to us. Heiko continues, *This turnaround touched on more than individual faith and righteousness; the totality of life was affected and thus had to be reconsidered. Throughout the coming years of confrontation and conflict, there was only one objective: to unfold the implications of this discovery and to see to it that they gained a wide hearing.*

And that, friends, was the Reformation. In Professor Oberman's words: "To unfold the implications of this discovery and to see to it that they gained a wide hearing." Some of us believe that this work is ongoing. I am one of those who believe that this work, this mission, must endure until the kingdom of heaven is fully realized. Human nature always tends toward control. And always tends toward self-deceit. God as Paul and Luther describe him must be met in surrender and in honesty. In some sense, for me, the Reformation must continue because the Gospel is perpetually at odds with human nature and human institutions. Sometimes at odds, alas, with the Christian church itself, which is at least partially a human institution.

So I tend to say, I tend to believe, that the Reformation is a heroic endeavor. A difficult project. A noble enterprise. Worth commemorating on at least one Sunday a year. "Here I stand!" Worthy of grand music and great hymns and joyful celebration.

However, in the service folder I provided a second quote, the last one, also from Luther. The first and last quotes are from Luther. In the last one, he says that what happened because of God's Word. Luther says, "I have done nothing, I let the word act." Luther said he proclaimed the word, slept, and drank beer with his friends Philip and Amsdorf. And he says, "Follow my example." So while I am inclined to think that Lutheranism is a heroic endeavor, a difficult project, a noble enterprise, worthy of grand traditions and even grand "Here I perhaps I need to take a chill pill. Luther's own advice: proclaim the word, sleep, drink beer with your friends. That's how it all happened. I did nothing. The Word did everything. Perhaps that is a mission statement for Lutherans, or for anyone who would support a Reformation: proclaim the word, sleep, drink beer with your friends. I will try to do more of that. Perhaps you should, too. May our work always begin from God's glory. And may our work always end in God's glory.