

"The Challenge of the Righteousness of God"

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¹³I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:13-17)

The act that we officially commemorate today is the hammer-wielding defiance of a middle-aged monk named Martin Luther, who on October 31, 1517, nailed a list of 95 theological ideas to the thick wooden doors of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His list put in written form the brooding concerns of many who feared that the Christian church was losing its way. Luther's bold statement, which spoke for so many, has been widely credited as the opening volley in what would become the Protestant Reformation.

There are many who believe, however, that the true beginning of the Reformation actually started brewing in Luther's heart about two years earlier. The exact date of his spiritual awakening is not known, but it was likely around 1515¹ when Luther found himself in the tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. The building had once been used as a monastery for Augustinian Hermits, but when the monastery closed down Luther took it over as his primary residence. He liked to study in the tower because it was one of the few areas that could be heated well. Having been lecturing his students at the University of Wittenberg on the Psalms, he had just turned his attention to Paul's letter to the Romans. It was a book that had long confused him, and as he prepared his lectures that confusion began to boil into a full-blown crisis. At the heart of his crisis was a phrase from the first chapter of Romans that we just read together -- "*the righteousness of God.*" Luther had always been taught that the righteousness of God was something that we did, or at least tried to do. As Christians, he believed, we pursued the righteousness of God by obeying God's law, but doing what Jesus would do. And, because we so often failed in those pursuits, he also believed that the righteousness of God was about the punishment of sinners. The righteousness of God was the same as the justice of God, and the justice of God could not abide sin or tolerate impurity.

This struggle with God's righteousness was nothing new to Luther. At this point, he had been a monk for about ten years, and during that entire time he had been terrified by one nagging thought: that as hard as he tried, and as hard as he worked, he never could seem to get it right. As a penance for sin, he would punish his body physically on a regular basis. He went to confession as often as possible, but as soon as he would leave the booth, he would remember something that he had forgotten to confess, or even just feared the possibility that he had forgotten something. And he knew that anything -- even the smallest blemish left without repentance -- could result in his

¹ Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985, p. 19.

eternal condemnation. He became obsessed with his sins and potential sins, spending hour after hour making long lists of every thought and action.² It was a horrible way to live, because as much as he did, nothing ever seemed to be enough. He became increasingly anxious, and then he became desperate, and then he became disconsolate with grief.

And then, Luther began to get mad... mad at God... mad at a God who seemed to have predetermined and preordained that human existence would be a failure. Looking back years later, he would write "I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I *hated* the just God who punishes sinners" (emphasis added).³ A God who would set us up like this, Luther thought, is not a loving God. This god is more like a merciless tyrant, or an abusive parent, and Luther found himself drifting away.

This frustration welled up, once and for all, one fateful night up in the darkness of that tower in the Black Cloister. There, in the light of one flickering candle, as Luther wrestled again with those words of Paul that hounded him day and night -- "the righteousness of God" -- the anger that was quickly turning into hatred finally erupted into a full-borne rage. I'm paraphrasing here, but Luther basically shouted out to God "Isn't it enough that we have to be miserable sinners... isn't it enough that we have to be lost for all eternity... isn't it enough that we have to try to live up to an Old Testament law that we can't possibly satisfy? So why, God, do you keep hounding us in the New Testament as well? Why must even the Gospel of Jesus threaten us with wrath and damnation?"⁴ He kept turning the words of Paul -- "the righteousness of God" -- over and over in his mind, but the more he did the deeper his pain and anger seemed to get.

And it was at this moment of his deepest anger, in the moment that he truly hated the God who wouldn't let us win, that Luther noticed, as if for the first time, the second half of Paul's idea. "*I am not ashamed of the gospel,*" Paul wrote. "*It is the power of God for salvation... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed **through faith for faith***" (emphasis added). In his frustration with the first part of the idea, Luther had completely missed the life-saving power of the second part, the part where Paul proclaims that "*The one who is righteous will live by faith.*"

This has been called "the great discovery" of Luther's life, the realization that the righteousness of God is not something that we have to do, or something that we have to suffer. It is, rather, something that God gives to us freely and lovingly. It means that obedience, faith and getting right with God is something that God does. The righteousness of God is God's righteousness, freely given to us in faith. In that moment, it was as if the Black Cloister was filled with light. "I felt that I had been born anew," Luther wrote, "and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase 'the [righteousness] of God' no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love."⁵

I would argue that this is also the great discovery of the Protestant Reformation -- the reforming of our understanding of what Paul meant when he said that we are justified not by works or deeds, but by faith. Almost twenty-four years ago to the day, on October 30, 1983, Dr. John Leith of Union Seminary in Richmond gave the sermon for the installation of the new pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. It was Reformation Sunday, so his comments to the new pastor Bill Wood and his new congregation focused on the same ideas we are commemorating today. In my favorite part of that sermon, Leith, who was an expert on church history and a great Presbyterian

² Ibid., 16-7.

³ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545)," <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/preflat-eng.txt>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. See also Gonzales, 19-20.

theologian, cited a recent historian who claimed that the Protestant Reformation represented the first time in all of human history when people, on a mass scale, had seen how an idea could change the world. Standing at the cusp of the Renaissance, Leith said that the church in the Reformation "gave a theological answer to... a basic human problem."⁶

That problem still exists. Like Luther, we still feel that problem in our bones. That problem is the fact that we, despite our sin, despite our disobedience and our frailties and our many imperfections, still want and desperately need to experience the love of a God who welcomes us like a wayward son or daughter who is finally coming home. Like Luther, I think many of us still fret over the sin that lives within us, sin that we simply cannot deny. Many of us still carry a deep sense of guilt that, no matter how hard we try, we just cannot seem to get it right. It is against this theological problem that the Protestant Reformation raised its great discovery, its greatest idea. "The Protestant Reformation," Leith preached, "had its origin in the profound awareness that the fundamental fact of human existence is the presence of a human being before the living God."⁷

Yes, that basic human problem still exists today. We still have to find some way to stand before the righteousness of God, knowing in our bones that we have no right to do so. But thanks be to God that today, nearly 2000 years since a Pharisee from Tarsus wrote about it in a letter to Rome, and 500 years after a frustrated monk rediscovered it for himself in the candlelight of a dark European tower, this beautiful idea also still exists -- this idea that the God of heaven and earth has taken this old problem of ours and drawn it into God's own heart, born it in God's own body, carried it through death, was raised to new life in spite of it, and now reigns in power over it.

The world still needs that idea -- this great discovery -- just as desperately as it ever has. That is both the heritage -- and the calling -- that we as a church celebrate today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ John H. Leith, "Our Protestant Vocation: A Sermon Preached for the Installation of William P. Wood," First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, October 30, 1983, p. 6.

⁷ Ibid.