

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17
"Faith Alone?"
Second Sunday in Lent

March 8, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Some years ago, Walter Carlson of Chicago's WMBI Radio took his show on location to Chicago's Union Station. While there, he asked passers-by this question: *How does a person go to heaven?*

For half an hour a parade of travelers responded with such answers as "Obey the Golden Rule," "Be good to your neighbor," "Go to church," "Do good," "Pay your bills."

These answers are all natural for all people, including us.

We are born with a good opinion of ourselves, with the idea that we are able to satisfy God with our own efforts. This is our natural tendency. We think that we are something.

So, how can we get right with God? How do we get to heaven?

This morning, the Apostle Paul and Jesus teach us how only by faith we receive the promise of eternal life, forgiveness of sins and salvation.

[Righteousness of Faith]

Really? Faith alone? Come on! Tell me what I really need to do to receive eternal life!

As Pastor Welch mentioned last week, there is a lot of confusion among Christians. One of the chief confusions is "How are we saved?"

Some churches say that Christians are saved through the concept of synergism. Now, synergism is a theological word that means that God and human beings work together in order to be saved.

In this false view, the only way to be saved is to believe in both faith and works.

Picture it this way: You are standing at the south rim of the Grand Canyon. In order to be saved, you have to get to the north rim of the Grand Canyon. You are told that you cannot take that long trip down and up through the canyon on a donkey. The only way you can be saved is if you jump across to the other side.

How in the world could anyone accomplish that?! I guess I could practice a lot by jumping further distances. But still, how would I ever know if I could make it?

In our epistle lesson, Paul appeals to Scripture to answer this question: ***“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’”*** (Romans 4:3).

Here, Paul is deliberately appealing to Genesis 15:6, which his fellow Jews generally assumed to be clear support of salvation by works.

You see, many rabbis assumed that Abraham was justified by keeping the Law perfectly. If this were true, Abraham had reason to boast.

But, as Paul says, Abraham could not boast before God, because Abraham was not justified by works, but instead he was justified by faith alone.

Paul’s main point is this: We become righteous by simply receiving God’s promise through believing.

“The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the Law but through the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:13).

You see, it’s all about faith!

As the Lutheran Confessions state:

“We are justified on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.”
(FC-SD III: Righteousness)¹

¹*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000), 563.9.

So, we are saved only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, with no merits of our own.

Now, do we throw out works altogether? No! You see, we still do good works, because they flow from faith. We do good works not for God, but for our neighbor.

[Spiritual Regeneration]

Now, when and where did we come to faith to believe in Jesus?

Jesus answers that question in our Gospel lesson.

Just as many rabbis were puzzled at Paul saying that we are saved by faith in Christ alone apart from works, Nicodemus came to Jesus in search of answers.

Now, Nicodemus wasn't your average Jew, he was in fact a Pharisee, one of the rulers of the Jews. Being an important man, he didn't want to be seen with Jesus, so he came to see Jesus in the cover of night.

Surprisingly, Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus by complimenting Jesus as a rabbi and that He has come from God. So, in a way, Nicodemus sees Jesus as somewhat an equal to him.

Now, Jesus sees right through these compliments. As God in the flesh, Jesus knows why Nicodemus is visiting Him. So, Jesus cuts right to the chase.

He says: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”*** (John 3:3).

Nicodemus responds: ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*** (John 3:4)

Jesus answered, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”*** (John 3:5-6).

Nicodemus is puzzled. What does this mean?

Here, Jesus is teaching how we become righteous. Here, He is teaching about Baptism, and not a literal second natural birth.

You see, in Baptism, we are regenerated. The Holy Spirit joins Himself with the water and the Word in order to accomplish this miraculous re-birth. In this Baptismal re-birth, the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to have faith to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Now, what about those who do not have faith in Jesus? Jesus answers: ***“He cannot enter the kingdom of God”*** (John 3:5b).

But, what if I donate to charity? What if I join the Rotary Club? What if I save someone from a burning building?

Nope. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is to have faith in Jesus.

Jesus cuts to the point: ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”*** (John 3:6).

The one born of human flesh is flesh. Now, flesh is our fallen sinful condition and when we are born, we inherit our sinful condition. This is original sin. Flesh is our fallen sinful condition – original sin.

Flesh only gives birth to spiritual death. Now, Spirit brings us life.

Now, how does water and the Word bring about new birth, new life, and faith in Jesus Christ? We will never fully understand. But, by faith, we believe that through Baptism we are no longer dead to sin, but alive in Christ!

[Faith Alone]

So, like Abraham who ***“believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,”*** we too, become righteous through faith alone.

And, like Moses, who lifted up a serpent on a pole and the people who looked at it were healed, Jesus was lifted up on the cross as the source of our salvation. So, when we believe that Jesus took away our sins through His sacrificial death, we are graciously saved.

Each Sunday, through faith in Christ, we receive God's gift of renewal as we begin each Divine Service *"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* With these words, we remember that by faith through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, we have received eternal life, salvation, and forgiveness of sins. We hear His Word and sing His praise knowing that by grace through faith in Jesus, the powers of sin, death and Satan have no power over us.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠