Biblical Text: Romans 3:19-28

**Introduction**

Every Reformation Day I’m stuck with a conundrum, actually two. The first one is simpler. Today, if you ask who was Martin Luther, the most likely answer you are going to get is “the leader of the Civil Rights movement.” This confusion is actually so complete that ChatGPT has trouble answering that question, or it did. The AI large language model would often hallucinate exactly that answer. Which I suppose shouldn’t surprise, because it was trained on our collective answers. If we are confused, then so is the AI.

But that confusion of the 20th century civil rights leader for the 16th century Great Reformer points to my second puzzle. Just how relevant is Luther and his problems to most people today? And I go back and forth. There are days I would answer “not relevant at all.” Martin Luther’s problem – he called it his anfechtung – it sounds better in German – was sin and righteousness. He accepted the bedrock Christian teaching that we are sinful. And what is meant by sinful is deserving of damnation. Oh yeah, Martin Luther also took it as given that Hell was a real place. That the natural place for all humanity to end up was in hell, absent some type of righteousness.

And the deep part of the anfechtung for Martin Luther was that whatever he did he never felt that righteousness. He did everything that his society told him to do and he still didn’t feel it. He felt the sin, but not the righteousness. Now we could just write Luther’s troubles off as a overly conscientious psychotic who we’d treat with Paxil today. There is an apocryphal story of Luther and his confessor that sounds a but like that. The father-confessor throws Martin out and tells him to go commit a real sin before coming back. But to do that doesn’t give the man – or those around him – full credit. Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s right hand man for the Reformation, would eventually Eulogize the Great Man, “that the age would not have been given so severe a doctor had it not been so sick.” Luther was just the man that expected the prescriptions of the age to work and when they didn’t would say so and wouldn’t be shut up.

But we don’t seem to be concerned about anything that Martin Luther was. We don’t assume we are sinners. In fact we assume that we are just fine, and if you don’t think we are, that is your problem. Often attaching the invective, bigot. We are not concerned with righteousness, at least not personal righteousness. Our righteousness or lack there of comes from whatever groups we belong to. We are collectively righteous – the oppressed, or unrighteous – the oppressors. And individually there is nothing we can do. In fact looking for personal righteousness is just refusing to accept and imposing a power structure.

And all of it is a game anyway, because there is no such thing as hell. If there is an afterlife, God is love, and he is the perfect acceptor. A game is probably the wrong word, hell is just the ultimate oppressor move. The ultimate assertion of power. That my vision of right and wrong is not just a temporal thing, but eternal.

Preaching Luther’s gospel freedom is either non-sensical. “What do you mean you will become free, we are the children of Abraham?” We are just fine as we are. It is either non-sensical because we don’t believe we have a problem with sin. Or is it already assumed, of course I’m righteous because God is love. And he just passes over everyone’s imperfections. We don’t hear Luther’s gospel because we assume it.

We assume acceptance, instead of receiving absolution.

**Text**

I think part of the Apostle Paul’s answer to us would be that yes, there is a power dynamic involved. But it isn’t mine, or his, or the apostle’s. The Apostle always insisted that he received his message straight from Jesus Christ. “Now we know that the whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law.”

We are under the law to the extent we are in this world. Jesus, the one through whom all things were made, who wrote the law, was under that law when he became incarnate of the virgin Mary. There is a power dynamic. God is god, and we are not. And even when God visited us, he did so under his own law.

And not all power dynamics are unjust. “The law speaks…so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” God has an absolute right. If God is who he says he is, it is not oppression, but his law is justice. And what that law tells all of us is that we are in trouble. No human being has ever been justified by the law. The only real thing that comes from the law is the knowledge of sin.

Now this is where I think we as a society are in deep denial. We will deny that God is real. We will deny that he has such a right. Or we will deny that some of the rule – take the 10 commandments as the shorthand – are actually God. Conveniently always the ones that give us trouble. And this is where I start to think that Luther might actually have some relevance for today. Because we would not deny it so forcefully. Yelling shut-up to anyone who points out that we have no excuse because we know. If we didn’t know. At a deep gut level we know. None of us are accepted. No human being is justified by works of the law. None of us are just. And if we demand justice, all we are demanding is our own damnation.

Coming out of the cave, coming out of denial is leaving behind acceptance.

**Christology**

Instead, “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law…the righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

For acceptance you can imagine a divine watchmaker, a world spirit, a generic God. And you can keep that generic god at a distance because he accepts.

But the God that we have is one that made the law. He is also one that lived under his own law and kept it for us. The God that we have is terribly explicit. He drew near to us. He hung on a cross. He begged for our forgiveness. He doesn’t accept, he absolves. By his wounds, we are healed. By the propitiation of His blood we have been given grace. And that is what absolution is, receiving a good that we do not deserve.

Everything that our world puts forward. You are accepted because of your works. You are accepted because of your group. You are accepted because of your specialness. You are accepted because darn it, you deserve it. It is all a bunch of junk. What we deserve is hell. If we don’t get it that is mercy, at least temporarily. God might in his divine forbearance pass over former sins. But we do not just have a God of mercy. We have the grace of Jesus Christ. We have the grace that doesn’t just turn a blind eye to our failings, but gives us his righteousness. Not a righteousness of our own. We can’t claim it by any justice. We are given divine righteousness. We are declared sons and daughters of God.

And we are declares heirs because of a very specific God – the crucified Jesus Christ. It is at the foot of the cross that we receive absolution.

If we are willing to be serious like Martin Luther we would ask questions about what the high priest of our culture tell us is our righteousness. We would ask question about why everything we do just seems to make things worse. We would ask questions about why we feel the need to constantly signal our virtue. We would be willing to leave behind the denial and say it doesn’t work. We are never made righteous by any law. And any boasting we do is whistling past the graveyard.

The only thing that works is the blood of Jesus. You have been made righteous not by anything that is in you, but from outside of yourself. Righteousness right now has come to you in Christ. And it is your to receive. And it is only received by faith.

**Moral**

Sadly. We can turn it down. We can double down on our claims about a God we do not know. We can maintain our denial and anger at Divine sovereignty.

We can demand acceptance and justice. And we will get them. Acceptance into the courtroom that gives us the justice we deserve.

Or we can ponder the cross and accept the absolution. That God’s love has drawn near to us. That his love for us is not some abstract thing, but as real as a broken bloody body. That he is not just just – that his law is good – but also the justifier – that he has given us his righteousness.

**Eschatology**

Luther wasn’t psychotic. That is the crisis of every age. And the stakes are so eternally real. “We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory.” But Jesus comes to us with absolution. Salvation unto us has come. Faith clings to that cross. Amen