

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Romans 3:21-25a,27,28

For there is not distinction.

“For there is no distinction...” But aren't distinctions what we do best? We fall by the law, and we are determined to get back up again by the law. These distinctions are nothing new. Adam pointed to Eve's sin. Eve pointed to the serpent's sin. Since then we have been looking for every possible loophole in God's holy law. “I don't do this often, so it is all right. At least I am not doing that. We love each other, so how can it be wrong. It would feel bad if it were bad. I can stop whenever I want. The only reason I did that was because someone provoked me. God knows I had good intentions behind what I did.”

We are good at distinctions, but Paul tells us our distinctions, like our sinful bodies and souls, can go to hell. How we view things is inconsequential in the long run. What matters is how God views things, and St. Paul tells us we have fallen short of the glory of God. We don't make the cut. We are failures in God's eyes when he views us through the law. Failures are always full of excuses and coulda-beens, but failures are failures, and rationalizing failure does not make it success. Almost only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades. *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

Some will not accept this. “I broke it. I fix it,” they think. The gospel is too easy for them. I myself thought this. I will never forget how angry I got when Pastor Vertz told me he was sure he was going to heaven in Adult Instruction Class, as I learned about Lutheranism as many of you adult confirmands have. To me, he thought he could do whatever he wanted and was too lazy to make up for what he had done wrong, tilting the scales of God's judgment in his favor. But, alas, I did not understand the law and he did, for he did not dismiss the law, but he did confess he could not keep it and trusted in the gospel. I was determined to earn God's favor by keeping the law, but it was precisely in my attitude that I sinned the most seriously, because I made the law something malleable and trite. We do not view human laws so frivolously. How could I view God's law that way?

Imagine if a murderer were on trial. “Did you commit the crime,” the judge asks. “Yes, sure did, but I also helped an old lady across the road and gave a dollar to the Salvation Army.” “Well, two good deeds trumps one bad one,” the judge answers. “I guess all is good and well. In fact, let me reward you.” No, that murderer's one act convicts him, and rightly so, no matter how good a man he seemed before the murder took place. He is a murderer, and murderers deserve to be punished, even if they are really nice murderers.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Here is a real preaching of the law, the kind without any pretense, the kind that bluntly declares reality: you have not and cannot keep the law, you sinful wretch. Deal with it. No, don't deal with it by explaining it away through semantics. Deal with it. Feel the fires of hell. Be swallowed up by your conscience, consumed by the guilt you deserve to bear all the way to your own crucifixion and hell itself. We are all willing to appeal to the law to get right with God, but none of us is willing to pay the price the law demands for what we have done: bloodshed and death. As I have asked umpteen times in bible class, what is the worst sin? It is the sin whatever sin someone else commits. But there is none of that here. *“For all*

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And don’t be mistaken, if the “*all*” that follows is going to apply to us, we better claim this “*all*” as our own as well, because Christ only saves sinners.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” When, after the fall, it became clear to God that nothing good remained in us, he provided goodness from outside of us. When it was clear that there was no power for salvation in us, God decreed the gospel, offering salvation through Christ. When it was clear that the conscience could never find rest in our own words, thoughts, and deed, God brought a peace for the conscience that cannot be destroyed or altered: the accomplished fact of Christ’s death and resurrection in our place. When Pastor Vertz told me he knew he was going to heaven, he was not boasting in himself. Rather, he had abandoned any hope in his own merit or capability and placed his hope in Christ. In Christ, he had hope and certainty. In Christ, then, he boasted.

As many of you know, I have about a fourth grade sense of humor, and so I think monkeys are rather funny. Thus, Luther’s analogy of a monkey turned my “haha”s into an “aha.” He writes: *“A monkey can imitate the actions of people, but he is not a man on that account. But if he should become a man, this doubtless would not take place by virtue of these actions, by which he has imitated a man, but by some other power, namely, God’s; but then having become a man, he would truly and rightly perform the actions of a man.”*

The noble heathen, that is, nice unbelievers, may be able to mimic the saints, who, in turn, imitate Christ, but, unless they are declared righteous for Christ’s sake through faith and thus receive forgiveness and grace, they cannot really do the actual works of God. They can only imitate them as a monkey imitates a man. Adherents of such work-righteous faiths may indeed be able to appear in every way holy, but the outhouse next to our garage could appear holy too if I painted it nicely and put church bells next to it. Regardless of its appearance, it would still nonetheless be an outhouse inside. While many might be shocked to find out that such a beautiful little building was an outhouse, those of us who knew what it was inside would not be shocked at all.

Thank God that I brought no paint today and that I have no church bells. I do have something better, however; I have Christ. And, because I have Christ, I have grace. And, because I have Christ and his grace, I have righteousness. You are not righteous. This side of heaven you will not be. You are, however, declared righteous in Christ. In God’s eyes, you are righteous, because in you, through faith, God sees Christ, and he cannot hate his Son, he cannot find fault with his Son. You are righteous, not with your own righteousness, but with his, made yours in baptism.

There are no distinctions. There is simply what you are and what you are in Christ. In and of yourselves, you are nothing special, a spiritual outhouse, perhaps with fresh paint and church bells, but still an outhouse. In Christ, however, you are righteous, right with God, holy, and pleasing to him. Remain in Christ, because, through the gospel, he intends to remain in you. Deplore what you are on your own, and treasure what you are in Christ. Turn from the filth that once defined you. Live in the undeserved spotlessness God has granted you in Christ. Live as the saints he has declared you sinners to be. Amen.