



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 1, 2017

“Faith Alone”

(Romans 3:28)

Rev. David K. Groth

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, You exalted Your Son to the place of all honor and authority. Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Last week's Gospel lesson reminded us we are saved by grace alone without any preceding, present, or subsequent human works. We are saved by grace alone . . . sola gratia.

The scriptures also teach we are saved through faith alone, and this faith too is a gift of God. It's not a decision we make. It's not a product of human strength or reason. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Our text says we are justified by faith. That means we are declared right with God through faith. The reason why this is true is because by faith we receive the forgiveness of sins (Apology, Article 4, p. 119). Without faith, we're still stuck in our sin. Without faith, there is no salvation. Faith is absolutely essential. Not even God can save us if we don't have faith.

Faith accepts the gifts that God wants to give us; unbelief rejects them (Ibid. p. 123). Luther wrote, "Faith is the 'yes' of the heart." "It holds out the hand and opens the bag and is content to receive nothing but gifts" (Plass, p. 491). Unbelief, in contrast, refuses the gifts. It says "no thanks. I don't need that. That's not for me." Or, as is often said, "He's never been one much for religion." Unbelief accuses God of lying to us. It denies God's Word, even despises God's Word. Unbelief is the only sin that damns us, because it rejects God's grace. Luther wrote, "No work is so evil that it can damn a man, and no work is so good that it can save a man; but faith alone saves us, and unbelief damns us" (Plass, p. 475).

Luther compared the unbeliever to a sick person who rejects the doctor and the medicine that would surely be a remedy. He considers the doctor a scoundrel and a fool, and the medicine useless (Plass, p.1404). Just as no doctor will

force himself on a patient against the patient's will, so also the Good Physician will not force himself on an unbeliever. Therefore, God doesn't so much condemn the unbeliever as the unbeliever condemns himself. As C.S. Lewis said, the unbeliever is not sent to hell. He gets there on his own steam.

Conversely, faith receives the gifts that God would give us. So, for example, Jesus said, "Take drink, this is my blood, shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." He meant it as a gift to us, so that we can be certain of forgiveness. We can see it, smell it, taste it, touch it. He gives our faith something to latch onto. As soon as we taste it in our mouths we know God has forgiven us. But unbelief rejects his words as unreasonable. Unbelief rejects the promise of those words, and therefore rejects the gift he wants to give. Unbelief says it's just wine, and just bread, a symbol, but nothing more.

A number of weeks ago I went to a funeral at a community church. Much of what the pastor said I could have also preached here as well. We certainly share more with other evangelical Christians than we differ on. Clearly, they have faith, and we are saved through faith. However, there are some important differences.

Where we would have an altar for the Lord's Supper, in this particular community church there was a drum set in a glass cage. It makes sense. If the Lord's Supper is only a symbol, and act of human remembrance, then it's just not that big a deal . . . might as well make better use of the space. But when faith says "yes" to the promise: "This my blood, shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins" then, absolutely, we want to have an altar front and center, and we want to receive the Lord's Supper often, and we want to offer it in fine vessels and cover it over with finely crafted linens, all to show how precious this promise is to us.

At this particular community church, there was also no baptismal font, and Holy Baptism was never mentioned. It wasn't an oversight; they're just being true to their theology. They think of baptism more as a promise we

make, a covenant an adult makes to God rather than the other way around. They think of it as a commitment we make to God to live a better life, more obedient and disciplined and God-pleasing.

I suppose if I thought of baptism that way, I wouldn't talk about it much either. It'd be like talking about your New Year's resolutions, and who wants to do that? Long ago they were blown to smithereens.

And so baptism was never mentioned at the funeral, and if you were to go there and ask them to baptize your infant, they would say, "Sorry, we don't do that." Maybe they would dedicate the infant, but that's not the same. That's hoisting a child up to God as best we can, whereas in Baptism, God comes down and claims the infant as his own, adopts it, puts his name on it, clothes it with Christ as Paul promised, and gives it faith.

At this same funeral, faith was not spoken of as a gift of the Spirit given through his Word. Faith was spoken of as a decision for Christ.

Do you see the consistent pattern? With Lord's Supper, Baptism and faith . . . who's doing all the verbs? Who's doing all the work? It's a theology that is anthropocentric . . . centered on man, and his works, his actions, his decisions. And so the music was anthropocentric too, focused more on the worshipper's emotions and feelings, the worshipper's praise. In short, it was not all about Jesus.

I guess the point is it's so easy even for well-meaning Christians to drift from grace alone and faith alone and Scripture alone.

Faith alone. Remember how the disciples feared for their lives out in that tiny boat in the middle of a great big storm? They woke Jesus up, and he took one look at them and said, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They thought they had faith, but apparently it wasn't nearly as strong or robust as Jesus thought it should be.

In our era, unbelief and doubt have been turned into virtues. In our era, many think because they don't believe or

because their faith is filled doubts, that must mean they're smart and sophisticated or self-reliant and courageous. But Jesus doesn't seem so keen on doubt and unbelief. Remember what he told Thomas. "Stop your doubting, and believe!" And to Peter, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt. 14:31). We live in a culture that thinks doubt is pretty cool, but Jesus says, "Knock it off! Enough of that, already!" Apparently he thinks it's dangerous. He knows and has told us there are forces inside and out that are warring against the faith. The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh would always have us mired in doubt and disbelief. Part the challenge is to beat back the deadweight of our old skeptical habits. Beat back the cynical disbelief lest it steals away our Christian faith.

Moreover, with our doubts the message we send to God is, "You are not trustworthy. You may be lying to us. We cannot fully trust your Word." In the garden, Adam and Eve took the serpent at his word, but God's Word they doubted. Luther said "a day will come when we will spit on ourselves and say: Shame on you that you were not bolder to believe Christ" (Plass, 488). Luther compared the doubting heart to a foolish beggar holding out his hat for gifts. But instead of holding it still, he constantly moves it around. God would like to fill our hats and hearts with good things but cannot; we won't let him (W 52, 464). That's what unbelief does. It rejects the gifts of God.

A few more things about doubts: Your doubts do not negate your baptism. God doesn't turn his back on his promise. Just because you have doubts does not mean you are no Christian. (Faith and doubt go hand in hand. We never have one without the other.) And just because you have doubts does not make you a second rate, inferior Christian. Just because you have doubts does not mean God loves you less nor does it mean he will save you less. Our text says, "we are justified by faith." No one has a perfect faith, so even with a faith that has holes in it, even with a partial faith, he justifies us fully. When God justifies us, there are no degrees of success. No, his justification of us is

instantaneous and complete, the believer being justified as soon as he trusts in Jesus for forgiveness.

God has mercy on those with weak faith. “A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will never snuff out” (Is 42:3). God gives perfect salvation also to those with imperfect faith. Again, a helpful quote from Luther: “It is true that you and I do not hold and believe the saving truth so firmly as St. Peter does. Yet we have one and the same treasure. Two persons may hold glasses of wine in their hands: the hand of the one trembles, the hand of the other does not. Two persons may hold a purse full of money: one with a weak hand, the other with a strong hand. Whether the hand is strong or weak, it neither increases nor decreases the contents of the purse. So the only difference between me and St. Peter is the fact that he holds this treasure more firmly” (Plass, 487).

Sola Fides. Faith alone. We have strong verses in Scripture which teach that God will not, and, in fact, cannot save anyone without faith. Faith is the key. So protect that faith of yours, as if it were a precious seed of fire that was struggling to take hold. Feed that little flame the oxygen of his Word.

But we also have strong verses in Scripture which teach that even if our faith is small, unimpressive, say, the size of a mustard seed, God can still do wonderfully impossible things for us.

In the end, then, and at the last day, it’s not so much about our faith. It’s still all about Jesus, who will take what faith he can get, even a faith that has been deceived, a faith that has been torn by doubts, a faith that has holes of unbelief in it, he’ll take what imperfect faith we give him, and he’ll accredit it to us as righteousness, because he is gracious and generous and wants all to be saved. And then he’ll welcome us home, where we will no longer live by faith, but by sight. Thanks be to God! Amen

