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Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
October 25, 2009 • Reformation Sunday
Romans 3:19-28

When the chips are down

We all have questions about God at some point in our lives. There are times in life when we struggle with the power of temptation. When we mourn the death of loved ones. When we question why God has allowed something bad to happen. When our church community is changing in ways we don't like. When it suddenly becomes difficult to pray.

Saint Paul's letter to the Romans asks questions that get to the heart of the matter. Who is God? What is God's character really like? From what we know, is God good? Is God faithful to the promises made to humanity?

The Law as Grace

Paul starts our passage by addressing humanity's relationship to the law. When we think of the law, we think of civil law. The laws of our country, and the law enforcement and courts that go along with them. But Paul brings up another form of law – religious law, that guides our beliefs, worship, and behaviors. In the Old Testament scriptures, God's covenant with the Jewish people occurs through

the law. It is the articulation of God's hopes and expectations for their life with God. It guides the Jewish embodiment of their faith in the God of Israel.

Jews have known for a long time that God's righteousness was revealed through the law. The Jewish law has been a vehicle for God's faithfulness in relationship to Israel. God chose them as special people. Invited them to worship the God of Israel. What we think of as "Old Testament" laws have brought people of God together. Have guided their worship and life in community. It has been a means of relationship with God. Through the Jewish law, God's grace and love has been shown to the Jewish people.

In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (*Rm 3:22-23*) None of us lives the fullness of what God envisioned for our lives. We fall short of the goodness for which we were intended. We fail to live in right relationships with others around us. We fail to care for our needy neighbors. We fail to worship God above all other things. Most of us, myself included, center our lives on something else. We worship at altars to our families or careers, to our nation, to the newest fads or the traditional ways. Even when we try, we fail to live by God's covenantal laws – like the ten commandments. Whether we are Jew or Gentile, we are found guilty in the face of

God's laws. If we think about what good is – the wholeness and rightness of God's creation – we are not good. Or righteous or just in God's eyes.

The Firecracker Explodes

Let's say that the Jewish law is a candle or a lamp. It's only big enough for a smaller group of people. Yet it lights their lives and their ways.

Compared with the light of the Jewish law, Jesus abounds with light. Perhaps he is like a firework. Exploding our world with color and sound. Transforming our lives into something different. Or perhaps Jesus is better compared to the sun in our sky. Providing light for not just a small group of people. But shedding light on the entire world, for all who can see. Enabling us to see and feel and experience God in new ways.

Transforming our lives

Like all metaphors, it breaks down here. For fireworks are largely for spectators. We see and hear. They mark a time of celebration for us, but then life returns to normal. Even the sun seems like a passive thing. It helps us to live, but it doesn't change who we are, or what we're about.

Yet the person of Jesus transforms our lives in a way that light can't do. To witness Jesus as God's son is to be invited to become a part of Jesus – by centering on his word, by receiving the gift of his faith, by being fed by his body, by participating in his mission. This is how God truly shows the divine character. For God's goodness and righteousness turns our lives into something new. Centers our world on our God who was revealed in Jesus Christ. Changes our relationships into ones marked by love for others, not by our sin and brokenness. Prepares us to be people who can live Jesus' grace for the world. With all these things, God's goodness, actually makes us good. God's righteousness, makes our lives right. God's generous will that the world be just, justifies us. That's how the Greek words were in our Romans text before they were translated to English. God's righteousness makes us right. The character of God has a direct impact upon our character.

A Reformation Call

This Reformation Day remembers a special time in our Christian history. The churches in Europe were trying to be faithful. Yet they were distracted by many things which were not essential to the faith. After reading scripture, Martin Luther called the church back to the heart of the gospel. He reminded Christians that our

lives should be focused on Jesus Christ and the word. It's not about any of the other things in our church life. Jesus Christ is the center for us. He is the gracious means of our re-formation as human beings. Our re-creation as children of God.

We are also at a special time in the life of Emanuel's. We hope to recollect ourselves, after one pastor left and another one came.

Amid the changes, we, too, have been distracted by many things. Last week's congregational meeting resulted in a very close vote about what to do with seating for the choir. Many of us are nursing hurt feelings. We are worried about what will happen with our sisters and brothers. We wonder how our divisions will be healed.

On this Reformation Sunday, our scripture calls us, again, to our center. Jesus Christ is the center for our lives of faith. Jesus is the light that guides our life of faith together. His word is our resource in times of uncertainty. His Spirit has the power to heal our relationships and our community. Our situation is quite different than Martin Luther's. But we will be formed anew as a congregation, by the power and love of God.

Our good God keeps his promises. So we trust that where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there. We trust that the Words speaks grace into our lives. That Jesus feeds us with his body and blood each Sunday. That our God is good, all the time. Thanks be to God.