

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/28/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

***ONE AT ONE** – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, March 29 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, thank God for the gift of grace. Praise God that in Jesus Christ, we have a means for moving past our sinful behavior and are restored in our relationship with God. Ask God to help us extend that grace in our relationships with others.*

Our Wednesday Bible study of Romans (on hiatus during Lent) has again reminded me of something that Christians do that makes no sense to me. I'm especially puzzled why some Lutherans, whose theology of grace springs forth so clearly from Martin Luther's study of Romans, do this very thing. Perhaps it's human nature or our sinful nature, but it is something we need to work to change in ourselves first and then in others.

Before I name it, let me go through a portion of the Letter to the Romans to sort of set the stage for this issue I'm raising. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul lists a large number of sins that we commit. He does this to show our "godlessness," as Paul says, and our need for God's righteousness and grace. Among these sins are sexual immorality, greed, envy, discord, dishonesty, gossip, arrogance, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, unfaithfulness, failure to show love, and failure to show mercy. It is a list in which everyone should find themselves. However, there are many Christians today who will pick out one or two particular sins of which they are not guilty (at least in their own mind), and point out that sinful behavior in others. (Perhaps it is again as I've mentioned before, the way to say, "Well, I may have eaten one cookie before dinner when I wasn't supposed to, but she ate two." In other words, if I find greater sin in someone else, I don't have to look at my own sin, or at least not feel as bad about it.) Paul makes it clear that pointing out sin in others doesn't excuse our own sinfulness, nor does it make us any better than anyone else.

Then in chapter two, Paul especially emphasizes that all are sinful. We are all in the same boat. None of us can live a life that is worthy of God and that we are all deserving of God's righteous punishment for our sin. No one of us has any hope—on our own, that is. We just can't do ourselves.

But then in chapter three and for the rest of this letter, Paul proceeds to share the good news of God's gracious love in Christ Jesus. For though we are sinful, we have a hope, and that comes through faith in Christ's sacrifice for our sins. Luther would always add the word "alone" after faith. So, in Paul's words with Luther's help, we are "justified (found innocent of sin) by grace (as a free gift) through faith (our belief in Jesus) *alone*." God's gift of salvation is available to all simply through faith, which is in itself a gift from God.

So, here's what bothers me. If we acknowledge that we are sinful people and our only hope is through faith, why do we condemn others? Why do we claim grace for ourselves, but deny it to others simply because we have problems with their particular kind of sin? If we are going to live in the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and claim that it is ours through faith, how can we not extend that same grace to others? All have sinned—every single one of us. Yet, all—every single one of us—can find salvation through faith alone.

We should not be separating out those who do not meet our standard for salvation or inclusion in the Body of Christ. It is God's decision and the message is clear that God's forgiveness is accessible to everyone simply on the basis of faith. If we are going to find our hope in faith alone, then we should extend the same hope to others through faith alone. Christians cannot condemn some and not themselves. Christian can not claim grace for themselves and not for others. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; but we (all) are justified by grace through faith *alone*.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey