

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Romans 3:19-28—Reformation Sunday

October 29, 2006
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19Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

21But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

27Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

You've heard of the *Stairway to Heaven* and maybe you watched Michael Landon in the 80's television program *Highway to Heaven*. But did you know that I have a ticket to heaven? Now according to Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, there is no such thing as a ticket to heaven. But I can't help but think that maybe they're wrong. It seems that there's got to be a way we can get ourselves into heaven, and if indeed there is, I've found my way—I've got my ticket.

But those reformers would disagree with me. They would say that a place in heaven isn't something we can earn. We're simply too sinful and fallen. Now those aren't words we often use anymore—sinful and fallen, but I do think we could all get behind the idea that human beings are prone to mess things up, get lazy, get greedy, get confused, get vengeful, get petty, and just all around not get it. Those might be more contemporary means of understanding what the Reformers meant when they said we are sinful and fallen. And because we are, they claimed that we are incapable, on our own merit, of earning a ticket to heaven. But that being said, I still think I may prove them wrong, I think I may accomplished the unaccomplishable, I think I may have earned my salvation.

And so I think the Reformers might be wrong about one's ability to earn salvation. And I'm not alone. The arguments of the early Reformers also stood in stark contrast to the practices of The Church in their time. At that time there was only one church in western Europe—the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the church's leaders set the rules for what happened not only in this lifetime, but also in the next.

To comprehend the church's power in that day, a brief review of history is likely in order. For centuries, ever since Constantine legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire with the Edict of Milan in 313, the pope, the priests, and the other church leaders gradually gained more and more power until most of Europe was a theocracy—nothing happened without the blessing of the church. The church was a major player in controlling government, the economy, and the law. Local parish priests could become

errant rulers. The local congregation was at the priest's mercy as he was often the only person in a village who was literate. He was presented as the intermediary between the people and God. And some priests abused their position and power. They convinced local congregants that in order to be saved, they needed to purchase indulgences, which the priests would then use to pad their own pockets. Even if there were literate members of a congregation, the mass was said in Latin and the Bible was read in Latin which gave the priest an inordinate amount of power in terms of interpreting scripture and church doctrine. Priests were held up as better than and above the citizenry which led to many abuses of power, and people.

Early Reformers, like Martin Luther who, in protest of the church's abuses of power, hung his 95 Theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg in 1517, recognized that something had gone terribly wrong. He himself was a monk, well learned in matters of scripture and church doctrine. He was outraged at the current state of the church and thus began an attempt to reform the Catholic Church, trying to make it more accessible to the people by having the scripture read and printed in the vernacular, the language of the people, and having lay people be more active in the life of the church. However, the reform turned into a revolution that we now know as the Protestant Reformation. It resulted in the formation of many different denominations that declared themselves independent of the rule of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. And so the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist, the Anglican Church, and later the Congregational and many other churches grew out of the Reformation and had in common their firm belief, as articulated by the early Reformers, that salvation comes through grace.

Now some modern expressions of these denominations have moved away from a strict adherence in that belief. They claim that you have to be saved in order to be saved. In other words, some kind of spiritual revelation during which you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior has to happen in order for salvation to be a part of your eternal plan. But even this expression goes astray from Luther and other reformers' original interpretation of scriptures such as the Romans passage from this morning. For the idea that salvation comes by grace and grace alone is not at all original to Luther and his contemporaries, rather it is an essential part of New Testament doctrine, particularly as it is found in the writings of the Apostle Paul, whose first hand experience of being saved on the road to Damascus was as sure a sign of any that God saves and uses the most broken and sinful among us.

And though everything Luther wrote about these issues makes sense to me, and though I believe in the texts of the Holy Bible, and though I acknowledge my own sinfulness as a human being and my inability to get it right all of, or even most of, the time. I still want to be sure. I want to be sure that, just in case Paul, and Martin, and Ulrich, and John, and my confirmation teacher got it wrong about all this salvation through grace stuff, I want to be sure that I'm doing everything I can in the here and now to assure that I've got a place in the There and Then. And so I confess that I still try and do the right thing, the merciful thing, the kind thing, the Jesus like thing, for sometimes what is not the Jesus like reason. Sometimes I do it kind of like I'm paying a premium on my soul's eternal

insurance policy—I do it to cover my hide. And I used to worry that I wasn't doing it enough. I was constantly on the look out for new opportunities to save my soul. But now I don't do that as often, not that I don't do good things as often but rather I think I do them for better reasons now. I've become much more relaxed about this eternal salvation thing since Willie came into my life. Because, you see, Willie is my ticket to heaven.

Now, I'm not sure that adopting a dog from a pound or rescue group, which is how we came to be Willie's guardians, is grounds for salvation. But over the past three years, I have grown convinced that adopting WILLIE *is* grounds for salvation. After getting to know him, I understand why he was in the rescue league system for so long and why we were his last resort, why we were *his* salvation, if you will.

Now this is Willie. And I imagine that from where you're sitting, he seems like a fine enough dog. But trust me when I tell you that Willie is the singularly most annoying creature I have ever encountered. When we are at home he barks incessantly for no reason. When all three dogs are napping on the rug, Willie often wakes with a start, jumps up, and begins barking ferociously at his sister Katie. And though he's not known a day of this earthly life without her company, day in and day out, he moves to attack her like she's a stranger out to take his life.

Willie has also ruined numerous pairs of my socks and pantyhose. He tries to capture my ankle in his mouth every time I leave the house. He has an anxiety disorder that is triggered whenever anyone picks up a set of keys or says the word goodbye, even if it's just into the phone. And when he gets anxious his herding dog instincts kick in and he grabs my ankle in his mouth and ruins my hose. Every time I leave our home it is in a state of hurried frustration because of that dog.

Willie also has wanderlust. And just when I think he's broken of his wandering ways and let him out loose to play with his sisters, he disappears again. And then I spend the next thirty minutes wandering around our rural neighborhood in tears looking for my poor, dumb dog. I've missed a wedding reception, been late to church, backed out of dinner plans with friends, and missed the season premier of my favorite television program because I've been out looking for him.

Willie is, in two words, dumb and annoying. But I love him. I really do. And if ever he actually did run away, I'd be devastated. Because, in the end, he's our dog, and along with biting my ankles when I leave, he kisses my face when I come home. Along with occasionally running away, he is usually right at my side. And though his barking is incredibly annoying, my life would be far too silent without it. And because I care for this dog, and more than that even love this dog, I'm confident in my salvation. Willie is my ticket to heaven because I do the right thing by him, even though it's can be very hard not to just beat him silly. So, just in case the dead, white guys did get it wrong, I've got it covered.

And that, I think, is the balance to the Reformers emphasis on salvation through grace and grace alone. Yes, it's what I believe is true of God in my heart of hearts, and yet I don't think it's a bad idea to live otherwise. I don't think it's a bad idea to wake every morning intent on doing good deeds. I don't think it's a bad idea to feel obligated to come to church and be a part of things here. I don't think it's a bad idea to try your darndest to love even the most unlovable of creatures. I don't think it's a bad idea to forgive others as God has forgiven you. Living like it matters, like your salvation is in the balance, is what makes the living matter. Now perhaps that's over-stating it a little and analyzing our every word and move could become exhausting and distracting, but you get the point. Though works might not matter in the final equation of your personal salvation, they surely do matter in the salvation of the world. And the only way the injustice, oppression, violence, greed, and cruelty of our society will ever be reformed is through the good works of God's creatures doing our best to bring about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

And so on this Reformation Sunday I thank God that our salvation comes through grace and grace alone, because Lord only knows what would happen to us if it didn't, if the state of our eternal souls was dependent on what we did yesterday and will do today and tomorrow and the next day and the next day after that. And on this Reformation Sunday I pray that God will give us strength and courage, akin to that of the early Reformers, to do the right thing, day in and day out—not for our own sakes, but rather for God's sake.