



Sermon, October 29, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path
Title: "Sola Fide?"

Scripture:

Romans 3:21-31 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²¹ But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^[a] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement^[b] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.^[c]

²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Romans 5:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[d] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[e] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[d] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.^[e] ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Opening Joke: ("... but I don't feel guilty about it anymore.")

A man entered a bar, bought a glass of beer and then immediately threw it into the bartender's face. Quickly grabbing a napkin, he helped the

bartender dry his face while he apologized with great remorse. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I have this compulsion to do this. I fight it, but I don't know what to do about it." "You had better do something about your problem," the bartender replied. "You can be sure I'll remember you and will never serve you another drink until you get help." It was months before the man faced the bartender again. When he asked for a beer, the bartender refused. Then the man explained that he had been seeing a psychiatrist and that his problem was solved. Convinced it was now okay to serve him, the bartender poured him a drink. The man took the glass and splashed the beer into the bartender's astonished face. "I thought you were cured," the shocked bartender screamed. "I am," said the man. "I still do it, but I don't feel guilty about it anymore." (Charles Sell, *Unfinished Business*, Multnomah, 1989, p. 223.)

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever had the interior dialogue (in your head and heart) that you just couldn't ever measure up to what either was expected of you, or what you thought you should be able to do or be as a person? Or maybe you are carrying the burden of guilt for something you did in the past that you are greatly ashamed of, but have never received forgiveness?
2. What would you give to have the burden of that kind of interior dialogue to be removed forever so you could be free to live fully, gratefully, and joyously?

Paul's struggle. (Romans 7:14-25) "14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.^[c] 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Paul struggled with trying to live up to the demands and expectations of righteousness defined through the law (Torah). He deeply desired to be in right relationship with God (the definition of righteousness) and had strongly opposed any teaching that he believed threatened the system that had been set up to assure the means whereby the Jewish people could live in righteousness. Christianity seemed to be such a threat. But then he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. As a result, he had to completely re-evaluate his way of thinking and acting. We see this struggle in his letter to the Christian community in Rome. Paul's imagery of the sacrifice of Christ is meant to demonstrate how Jesus brought the key to the fullness of life (John 10:10), a way that removed the burdens our culture, upbringing, and interior thoughts place upon us as well as the guilt we carry around from what we have done (cf. Matthew 11:28-29).

In a nutshell, the issue stated in modern language is this: God has created us with the potential of a richly, joyfully fulfilled life that is expressed in loving engagement with one another, just relationships within society, and a life-giving embrace of the rest of the created order of which we are a part. But there are forces in the world and within ourselves that block us and prevent us from living out that potential of a richly, joyfully fulfilled life. And when we measure ourselves against this potential life, and against God, we feel totally unable to live up to it, totally unworthy, filled with sin, ashamed, guilt-ridden in all sorts of ways for all sorts of things. Who will rescue us from these bodies and minds that seem so devoted to death instead of life?

Two reformers living 300 years apart realized this issue was at the heart of the Christian message, and the church had wandered away from it.

Francesco Bernardone (adapted from Catholic.org, "St. Francis.")

In 1182, Pietro Bernardone returned from a trip to France to find out his wife had given birth to a son. Far from being excited or apologetic because he'd been gone, Pietro was furious because she'd had his new son baptized Giovanni after John the Baptist. The last thing Pietro wanted in his son was a man of God – he wanted a man of business, a cloth merchant like he was, and he especially wanted a son who would reflect his infatuation with France. So, he renamed his son Francesco – which is the equivalent of calling him Frenchman.

Francis enjoyed a very rich easy life growing up because of his father's wealth and the permissiveness of the times. Enjoying his father's wealth, Francis enjoyed parties and a free and easy life. But he wanted more. He wanted the nobleman's life and the life of a knight, being proved in battle. This was the time of the Crusades. Francis signed up and his father paid for his armor. But Francis never got farther than one day's ride from Assisi. There he had a dream in which God told him he had it all wrong and told him to return home. And return home he did, not to a happy father.

Francis' conversion did not happen overnight. Francis started to spend more time in prayer. He went off to a cave and wept for his sins. Sometimes God's grace overwhelmed him with joy. His search for conversion led him to the ancient church at San Damiano. While he was praying there, he heard Christ on the crucifix speak to him, "Francis, repair my church."

Rebuilding the church became a lifelong task. Francis started to preach. (He was never a priest, though he was later ordained a deacon under his protest.) Francis was not trying to be a reformer; he preached about returning to God and obedience to the Church.

Slowly companions came to Francis, people who wanted to follow his life of sleeping in the open, begging for garbage to eat...and loving

God. With companions, Francis knew he now had to have some kind of direction to this life so he opened the Bible in three places. He read the command to the rich young man to sell all his goods and give to the poor, the order to the apostles to take nothing on their journey, and the demand to take up the cross daily. "Here is our rule," Francis said – as simple, and as seemingly impossible, as that. He was going to do what no one thought possible any more – live by the Gospel. Francis took these commands so literally that he made one brother run after the thief who stole his hood and offer him his robe!

Francis' brotherhood included all of God's creation, feeling that nature, all God's creations, were part of his brotherhood. The sparrow was as much his brother as the pope. Francis did not try to abolish poverty, he tried to make it holy. When his friars met someone poorer than they, they would eagerly rip off the sleeve of their habit to give to the person. They worked for all necessities and only begged if they had to. But Francis would not let them accept any money. He told them to treat coins as if they were pebbles in the road. When the bishop showed horror at the friars' hard life, Francis said, "If we had any possessions we should need weapons and laws to defend them." Francis has much to teach us today!

Martin Luther (*the following comments are derived from several sources*):

Martin Luther was born 301 years after St. Francis. Whereas Francis never wanted to found a religious order, Luther felt called to join the Order of St. Augustine, and threw himself completely and wholeheartedly into its life of prayer, study, confession, and repentance. Luther struggled with many of the same questions that St. Paul wrestled with 1500 years earlier.

From 1514 Luther was not only theology professor at Wittenberg University but also the priest at the City Church in Wittenberg. So, he was also responsible for the salvation of his parish. Luther observed that many people in Wittenberg were not coming to him for confession any more. They were going to towns in Brandenburg or Anhalt like Jüterbog or Zerbst to buy Indulgences (primarily the Peter's Indulgence).

The practice of buying indulgences, which quasi replaced confession and allowed people to buy their salvation, was completely repulsive to Luther. He strongly believed that one lived a life of humility in order to receive God's grace. After 1507, trade in Indulgences took a steep climb because both the Papal Court and Bishop Albrecht von Brandenburg Germany's representative for the sale of indulgence were in great financial trouble. In addition, the Dominican monk, Johann Tetzel, sold indulgences in the region around Wittenberg in a very ostentatious manner. Many stories started popping up about him such as, that Tetzel could redeem the sins of the deceased. Further sayings of Tetzel, such as, "When the money clangs in the box, the souls spring up to heaven", also brought protests from Luther.

October 31, 1517, "The 95 Theses"

Prior to October 31, 1517, Luther had preached against the indulgence trade. After reading an instruction manual for indulgence traders, he wrote a letter to his church superiors hoping to get rid of this abuse. In this letter, he included 95 Theses which were to be used as the basis for a discussion on the topic. That Luther hammered his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg belongs to the realm of legends (the legend of Nailing the 95 Theses to the Door of the Castle Church). Luther sent his 95 Theses to a few bishops and some friends; therefore, he did not expect or receive a prompt response. By the end of 1517, however, copies of the 95 Theses had been printed in Leipzig, Nuremberg and Basel. Some humanists and princes passionately approved of the theses, but parts of the Roman Church completely rejected them. The most vehement voice against the theses was the Indulgence Priest Tetzel, who supposedly categorized Luther as a follower of the heretic Jan Hus and threatened to have him burned at the stake.

At first the bishops reacted mildly, they informed the Pope of the 'rebel within the ranks' and instructed Luther's direct superior to take a moderate roll in calming him. A few bishops actually welcomed Luther's ideas for reform. Because of increasing pressure, Luther found it necessary to explain and clarify his theses in writing. In 1518, Luther

himself said that he only wanted to take care of an abuse (indulgence) and was not striving to unhinge the papacy with his theses. The avalanche, however, was now unstoppable. The Papal Court reacted drastically to the alleged heretic and in 1518 an inquisition was begun in Rome. This quieted down in 1519 during the search for a successor to the deceased Emperor Maximilian. Once Karl the V was elected as emperor, the fight against Luther and his followers continued.

Luther took his own sinfulness very seriously, and the sale of indulgences were to him what today we might call a "Get out of Jail Free Card." No change of heart, no change of life, no opening into the joyful fullness of life that Jesus made possible. As Luther confronted these abuses of Church authority, he also found a salve for his own soul in the very words we read this morning and Paul's own inspired realization that our salvation is not from anything we do, but is a free gift from God. Our life isn't to be burdened by trying to please God. God already loves us. Jesus came to show us the way to the center of this love of God, and his death symbolized and enacted the overthrow of the power of sin over us and released us from the tyranny of our feelings of guilt.

That is the central message of the Gospel. You are already loved by God. Whatever you struggle with, whatever you have done in your life or whatever has been done to you, God has taken the hurt, the sting, the guilt, the shame, the struggle, the frustration, the anger, the pain - all of it - God has taken it away from you, removed the burden from your heart. Jesus died and overcame death so death and all its insidious ways would have no power over you.

Prayer