

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Pastor Bill Uetricht Reformation 10/25/09

This past week at our new members' class one of the members of the class, after I had talked about the central teaching of Lutheranism, said, "That is mind blowing." And I said, "Yes, yes, yes!" If you get it, life will never be the same again.

What we were discussing is Lutheranism's big document, **The Augsburg Confession**, and in particular, the fourth section of this document, known, amazingly, as Article Four. This article reads: "It is taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith." This was the rallying cry of the Reformation.

But what does this rallying cry mean? Well, I think that there are many ways to explore and explode the meaning of this teaching, a teaching reflected in our second lesson for today from Romans, in which Paul says: "But now, irrespective of the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified by his grace as a gift."

This blind-blowing teaching means that the forgiveness of God can't be bought; the forgiveness of God can't be earned. This teaching means that what matters in life isn't what you accomplish, what you do. Life is not about who gets the most, has the most, performs the most, succeeds the most often. Your worth as a human being is not a matter of the scorecard. Life before God is not a matter of earning points. Righteousness before God is not discovered in the scorecard,

but in faith. And faith, as Paul says, is never a matter of bragging, because faith, or trust, as faith is best translated, is the recognition of our own dependency, the recognition that we rely on the gift, not on ourselves. Faith is never a matter of the scorecard because faith, Christian faith, involves throwing the scorecard away.

Ann Herbert, a former professor at Capital University, has written a wonderful story about the human addiction to the scorecard, a story that rightfully takes us back to the beginning, to the Genesis account of the creation of us humans.

The story goes like this: “In the beginning, God didn’t just make just two people. He made a bunch of us because he wanted us have a lot of fun, and he said you can’t really have fun unless there’s a whole gang of you. He put us in Eden which was a combination garden, playground, and park and told us to have fun.

At first we did have fun just like he expected. We rolled down the hills, waded in the streams, climbed on the trees, frolicked in the woods, and acted silly. We laughed a lot.

Then one day this snake told us that we weren’t having real fun because we weren’t keeping score. Back then, we didn’t know what score was. When he explained it, we still couldn’t see the fun. But he said we should give an apple to the person who was best at all the games and we would never know who the best was without keeping score. We could all see the fun of that, of course, because we were all sure that we were best.

It was different after that. We yelled a lot. We had to make up new scoring rules for most of the games. Others, like frolicking, we stopped playing because they were too hard to score.

By the time God found out what had happened we were spending about 45 minutes a day actually playing and the rest of the time working out scoring. God was wroth about that—very, very wroth. He said he couldn't use his garden anymore because we weren't having fun. We told him we were having lots of fun. He was just being narrow-minded. He wouldn't listen.

He kicked us out, and he said we couldn't come back until we stopped keeping score. To rub it in, he told us we were all going to die and our scores wouldn't mean anything anyway.

He was wrong. My cumulative, all-game score now is 16,548 and that means a lot to me. If I can raise it to 20,000 before I die, I'll know I've accomplished something. Even if I can't, my life has a great deal of meaning because I've taught my children to score high, and they'll be able to reach 20,000 or even 30,000.

Really it was life in the garden that didn't mean anything. God actually has a very superficial view of life, and I am certainly glad my children are being raised from his influence. We were lucky. We're all very grateful to the snake."

We're all addicted to the scorecard. The scorecard is what our parents gave us, the culture gives us, we give ourselves. Life, you see, is about getting the most points. Life is about doing the most, having the most. We've got points to earn with our parents (they forever cast a shadow on our lives), points to earn from the neighbors (I mean what will they think), points to earn from the church (how embarrassing it is when our kids behave worse than theirs), points to earn from the people who come to our houses (after all their stuff is nicer and their house is cleaner), points to earn from the people on our boards (I mean how are we going to know who does more or less), points to earn with

our kids (we've got a lot of making up to do, you know). Points, points, points. It's all about points.

No, it is not. "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since, truthfully, no one measures up. All are justified by grace as a gift." There is no scorecard. Life before God is not a matter of earning points.

That's mind blowing. But in many ways, it is the best news that you will ever hear. Oh, there is such freedom when life is not lived on the basis of the scorecard. There's a whole lot more frolicking that happens when life is not a matter of winning or performing. There is a whole lot more fun that takes place. Just think about all the good things that you can do for others—the good that you can do that will be done in a spirit of joy, not resentment. You won't need to ask who is doing more or less. It won't matter. You'll do what you do because you can, because you want to. And sometimes you might decide not to do something because you don't want to do it. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Oh, the freedom, there is Christ.

But yes, this freedom doesn't come without a cost. I said that the mind-blowing news that life before God is not a matter of earning points is in many ways the best news you have ever heard. But I must also tell you that it is news that means death. Paul says that the grace that is our gift, that we receive through faith, comes through Jesus Christ *and his cross*. "They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the [freedom] that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood." Freedom and salvation came through a bloody means. They came through death, death on a cross. Being set free from the scorecard isn't easy.

It's hard to be transferred from the realm of the scorecard to the realm of God. There's a lot of dying that needs to take place. I've got to be honest with you. I am high performer. I normally end up being the president of every organization that I am a part of. I was a five-star student. I played first trumpet in the band. I normally can get the vocal solos. I can preach and teach with the best of them. I can ride my bike farther and exercise longer than most of you. And often I can beat you at Pinochle, Hearts, and LiGretto. So to hear that life is not about performance is for me to have to die. I like starting my sentences with "I." To be transferred into the realm of God, to live a life in which the scorecard has been discarded, is to have the "I" put to death. And by the way, this holds true for the low performers as well as the high performers. Some of us who seldom get around to performing can be as preoccupied with ourselves as are those of us who are on the stage all the time. We sure can get a lot of attention when we play the "Oh-we-aren't-worth-very-much game." When it's all about the gift, we all die, the high performers and the low performers.

So today, you get the best news you'll ever hear, mind-blowing news. It's not about the scorecard. It's about the gift. "Apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Jew or Gentile, they all are justified by his grace as a gift." But that mind-blowing news is also the hardest news you'll ever hear. It's not about you; it's about the gift. The gift comes through a cross. There's a whole lot of dying that takes place when you trust in the gift. But even that is good news. It was death that led to Jesus' resurrection. It is death to ourselves that will bring us new life.