

## **“Set Before Us Today”**

### **Romans 5:12-19**

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man,  
and death came through sin,  
and so death spread to all because all have sinned —  
sin was indeed in the world before the law,  
but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.

Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses,  
even over those whose sins  
were not like the transgression of Adam,  
who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass.  
For if the many died through the one man’s trespass,  
much more surely have the grace of God  
and the free gift in the grace of the one man,  
Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.

And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the  
judgment following one trespass  
brought condemnation, but the free gift  
following many trespasses brings justification.

If, because of the one man’s trespass,  
death exercised dominion through that one,  
much more surely will those who receive  
the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness  
exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all,  
so one man’s act of righteousness  
leads to justification and life for all.

For just as by the one man’s disobedience  
the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience  
the many will be made righteous.

# **Justification and Life for All**

Romans 5:12-19

February 26, 2023

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

## **I.**

This morning's sermon is the direct result of our church breathing; a steady rhythm of spirit rising and falling within the body of Christ and, now, rising once more. Two Sundays past, I gathered with a roomful, and computer screen full, of folks attending a New Member class. Beyond an earnest sense of thanksgiving for their interest, time and attention, I was left with two questions regarding the form and function of our church which, while not nagging, have been greatly on my mind. Questions I would like to address today, with the first requiring an historical deep dive and the second question serving to invite us to walk a theological razor's edge. The first question has to do with why we, as Presbyterians, do not actively observe Ash Wednesday (which was this past week) while the second question gets to the heart of John Calvin's doctrine of Double Predestination (kind of).

## **II.**

One of the main objectives of the New Member Class is to locate the Reformed Tradition as it is expressed in Presbyterianism within the world's religions and, moreover, among the variety of Christian denominations and their various sects; a matter of articulating who we are, and who we are not, in contrast and with respect to others as seen in what we believe (our function) and how we organize ourselves (our form).

Several days after the class, I received an email from one of the attendees asking why Presbyterians don't observe Ash Wednesday? I responded by admitting I did not know the specifics, but suggested it had to do with the 16th century Reformation and the movement toward less ornate and ritualized religious practice and the emphasis on the primacy of scripture as seen in the motto of the Reformed Tradition: "*Sola Scriptura*"; that is, by scripture alone.

### III.

As I said, this was just a guess. The issue, though, is one I thought we might find interesting to explore, especially as we begin the journey through the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is a solemn reminder of human mortality and the need for reconciliation with God which marks the beginning of the penitential Lenten season commonly observed with ashes and fasting; with the actual ashes the product of burning the palms from prior year's Palm Sunday.

In many ways, though, the modern observance of Ash Wednesday is but a remnant of a much earlier and far more austere observance of the 40 days of Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends at Easter, with the intervening Sundays excluded from the count, resulting in a number commensurate with Jesus's 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness; not to mention the cruise time for Noah's Ark.

### IV.

At its conception, the season of Lent was meant to be a long and arduous task asked of every believer as a reminder of, and participation in, the suffering of Christ. In the early church, the sojourn that was Lent began with the faithful donning sackcloth, being sprinkled with ashes and, then, the obligation to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday; the occasion at which Christ celebrated the Last Supper and washed the feet of the Disciples. Later, when these practices fell into disuse between the 8th–10th century, almost certainly due to their rigor, the beginning of Lent was more symbolically observed as a one day event where the sign of the cross was placed on the foreheads of those in the congregation on what became known as "Ash Wednesday." In either manifestation, the message delivered by the application of ashes was the same: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

### V.

Within the first decade of the Reformation, however, ashes began to be discarded by both the Reformed Church founded on the teachings of John Calvin and the Lutheran Church led by Martin Luther. In his 1526, *The German Mass and Order of Service*, Luther explains that while the fasts and feasts of "Lent, Palm Sunday, and Holy Week shall be retained, this, however, does not include the Lenten veil, throwing of palms, veiling of pictures, and

whatever else there is of such tomfoolery.” In short, Luther saw the practice of placing ashes as an unnecessary frivolity.

Whereas many Protestants who hail from a so-called “high church” background (Episcopal or Lutheran) may understand the placing of ashes as an ancient and unbroken custom, in point of fact, the practice is fairly new. It isn’t until the tail-end of the 19th century that we start to see liturgical innovators begin to reintroduce the practice, with widespread adoption in this country only occurring in the 1960s and 1970s arising from the ecumenical liturgical movement sparked by the second Vatican Council.

## **VI.**

For Protestants, then, the observance of Ash Wednesday, and the practice of placing of ashes on the foreheads of believers. is in no way an obligation. In recent decades, however, it has become an option. While, historically, it is an option that Presbyterians have typically not embraced, that may change and, in fact, *is* changing in some Presbyterian congregations. Certainly, there is no reason why we, ourselves, cannot or should not observe. the placing of ashes next year here on the Park if the Spirit moves in us and among us and causes our church to breath in such a way; and, so long as we are clear as to *why* we might do so. That is to say, so long as we keep the theological horse ahead of the liturgical cart. Hold that thought.

## **VII.**

As part of Paul’s great theological treatise that is the letter to the church at Rome, our sermon text for today, 5:12-19, lays out a systematic theological understanding of justification that almost rises to the level of the mathematical. That is, a cohesive and ordered explanation of how sin came into he world through one individual, Adam, and how this sin is overcome, correspondingly, through one individual, Jesus the Christ. Here, in Paul’s view, the free gift of grace overcomes trespass and death; not just on a personal or individual level but, as he will go on to flush out later, a free gift of grace that justifies and redeems the entirety of the cosmos thereby fully and finally reconciling it to God.

## VIII.

The theological rub for us today is the tension between two statements which are to be found within this same scriptural stanza.

The first in verse 15:

*For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.*

Now, the second, in verse 18:

*Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.*

Given these two statements, we may rightly ask, "Well, which is it: for the many, or for all?" Do *many* (meaning only some) receive the free gift of grace, or does Christ's act of righteousness lead to justification for *all*? This is the theological razor's edge upon which I would invite us to walk this morning. After all, it is the first Sunday Lent; the ecclesiastical season intended to encourage the believer to plumb the depths, but also soar the heights, of their faith.

## IX.

On the one side of the razor's edge is the idea that while the cross of Christ pays the wages of sin for all, only some or, hopefully, many will avail themselves of that opportunity by responding in faith to the free gift of grace offered. This has been the church's party line for the past 2000 years; and, for the most part, we seem to like it this way. We are, after all, special: aren't we? With all due respect and in all fairness, those who believe in Christ and strive to live their lives accordingly *should* receive something more than those who do not. Each one of us has been given the free will to choose to believe or not. There are consequences which ensue from that decision, and rightly so. That said, the resulting theological perspective leads to a very problematic and, for John Calvin, untenable conclusion: that we, ourselves, are the final arbitrators of our own salvation.

## X.

For Calvin, the chief architect of the Reformed Tradition to which we Presbyterians belong, divine sovereignty was at the cornerstone of the systematic theology he devised and to which we, now, ascribe. Only God, and

God alone, gets to decide who is justified, redeemed, and saved. Which, upon first hearing, is something to which we might all readily agree. This, however, leads to its own problematical conclusion: that while God creates many destined to be saved, others are created destined to be damned. This is the very same issue that was raised by another attendee of the New Member Class. The Doctrine of Double-Predestination, as it is termed, paints a fairly unappealing picture of what we would like to imagine is a grace-filled and loving God. Wouldn't you agree?

## **XI.**

While I cannot disagree with Calvin's emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God over the freewill of humanity, I would argue that he fails to follow another path his very own reasoning might rightly provide. That is, a path which leads us to the *other* side of the razor's edge: where God alone, through Christ's act of righteousness, leads to justification, redemption, salvation and life for *all*, not just the many.

In Paul's way of thinking, this is no liberal position but the natural conclusion of his own nascent systematic theological understanding where the cross is seen not as a means to *individual* salvation, or even the salvation of *many* individuals but, rather, a salvation that mends the tear that sin created in the very fabric of the cosmos. Seen in this light, of *course* one man's act of righteousness must *necessarily* lead to justification and life for ALL.

## **XII.**

While 2000 years of church orthodoxy would have us choose the side of the razor's edge where salvation is reserved for believers who respond to the cross with faith, we also find in scripture, today's text is but one example, that there is an argument to be made for choosing the other side of the razor's edge where salvation encompasses not just all of humanity, but the entirety of the Creation. While the vast majority of people will fall down on one side or the other of this edge in their own personal beliefs, sometimes gleefully so, I would like to suggest that this congregation, both as a body and the individuals who comprise it, are uniquely suited to, instead, keep a steady balance that allows a journey which walks the razor's edge between these two, seemingly, contrasting positions. In doing, so we accept that for God these may be in no way contrasting at all.

### **XIII.**

While we do not possess the ability to know the mind of God, it is sometimes helpful to remind ourselves of this fact; which is part of what I hoped we would accomplish today. The other part pertains to the thought you've been holding regarding Ash Wednesday, and why we might consider observing it more fully at some future point; but only if we do so for the appropriate theological reasons.

Whether we understand ourselves to be saved through the faith we muster in the cross, or by being gathered up as part and parcel of the cosmos which the cross reconciles to God, the act of receiving ashes upon one's forehead should not be act of remembrance or some symbolic participation in the suffering of Christ but, instead, a profound act of *gratitude*. A moment where we truly recognize and admit to ourselves that we *are* dust, and to dust we shall return...if it were not for God.

### **XIV.**

While we very well may want to consider our own Ash Wednesday service next year here on the Park, we stand in good company in recognizing that regardless of the rituals in which we may or may not partake what lies at the very heart of Lent, both as a first step and our final goal, is a humility void of abasement which arises from the ashes of a fiercely burning honesty in acknowledging the sovereignty of the God who created us, redeems us and, even now, is sustaining us. That through the cross of Christ there is justification and life...for *all*. Amen.