

Romans 5:12-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹² 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— ¹³ sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not **reckoned** when there is no law. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

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. ¹⁹ For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made **sinner**s, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰ But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, just as **sin exercised** dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification^[a] leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Admittedly when I sat down to write this sermon I could not figure out how I was going to tie the **Reformation** in with Lent. I hadn't the slightest idea how to begin. The Reformation Era is known as a time of change and renewal but perhaps more importantly as a time of **restoration**. It was a time to return to the core beliefs of the church, to remember the call of the church and to reclaim the importance of the Scripture as the divine word of God. Lent is a time to reflect on the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on the cross. For many, the 40-day stretch is a period of **self-denial or self-sacrifice**, when we remember the time Jesus spent in the wilderness. In this time of reflection and abstinence we often focus on what we are giving up or sacrificing. We dwell on the loss sacrifice brings.

In our scripture reading for today we read the words Paul wrote to the Romans, (v. 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. For just as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Paul recalls the resulting spiritual death of humanity

and the entrance of suffering and brokenness into the world, through the act of one man's disobedience. Humanity, condemned, is locked into its suffering and brokenness, **unable to free itself**. Death has dominion over the earth.

The death Paul speaks of in Romans is not however the physical loss of life. It is not the cessation of breath or a failed heart beat, but it is a death that separates humanity from its creator. It is the type of loss that one can only mourn and grieve over but cannot overcome on its own.

What was lost was life in God.

A theological student cannot study the Reformation era without learning about Martin Luther. (You see) Martin Luther was a devout monk. He lived a life of piety. However, Luther had a problem. Luther **wrestled** with the idea that somehow his own actions could make him righteous before God. He writes "Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased God with my works." Luther's turmoil was grounded in the realization that he was locked in the **brokenness of sin** and could not free himself despite his pious living.

Not many of us would say we live a blameless life. And we would **certainly** not consider becoming a monk or a nun. But I suspect most of us do not usually think of ourselves as sinners **or wrestle** with the ideas of righteousness, salvation, or justification. Luckily for us we have those like Luther, who came before us and who did wrestle with the ideas of **righteousness, salvation,** and justification.

Paul's letter to the Romans talks about one man's transgression and the detrimental effect it had on humanity. Luther lived part of his life trying on his own to right the wrong of that transgression. That may **sound familiar** to some of us. We attend church on a regular basis, we sit on as many committees as possible, we volunteer at every church function. We even practice the observance of self-sacrifice or fasting during the Lenten season. We live as devout and pious lives as we can. But sometimes in living out our Christian faith we forget to include God **in our plans,** in our decisions and our lives but more importantly we forget what God did for us in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Like us today, Luther read Paul's letter to the Romans, but he did not just read it, he studied it. Luther's faith was transformed as he tried **to understand** Paul's teachings. Listen again to verse 5:15, "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." Death does not have the final say. We cannot overcome the brokenness of sin in humanity but there is one who can, and he is God's gift to humanity.

Paul goes on to say in verses 16 and 17, "for the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation." BUT the free gift brings **justification**. Through "one man's trespass, death **exercised dominion**, BUT, "for those who receive the abundance of grace and free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

As a theological student I can appreciate Luther's struggle with the **teachings and readings** of Paul's letter to the Romans. The realization that God's gift to humanity, to me, unmerited, undeserved, unearned –

free for me to receive is overwhelming humbling and transformative. I serve as a deacon, and on the worship committee and I sing in the church **choir but none** of these things merit or warrant the gift of God's grace. God's gift to me is not dependent on my actions or my behaviors, it is not dependent on how I view myself or on how I am viewed by others. God's gift is not dependent on my own strength or knowledge or my **weaknesses** or failures. God's gift is freely given based on God's love for me.

As I studied the Reformation Era and I learned about Luther's transformation as he realized the magnitude of God's gift to him, I realized something about myself. I realized that I have not fully accepted **the gift of God**. You see a gift is not truly given unless it has been received.

As we prepare our hearts and minds to observe this season of Lent and contemplate on what if anything we are going to abstain from, let us take time to reflect on why we are or are not abstaining or fasting.

What is our motivation? Is it in observation of a long-standing tradition or is it something more? Are we mourning the loss of life

through the brokenness of sin or dwelling on the feelings of loss sacrifice brings? Have we forgotten the gift of God's grace?

I think both Paul and Luther would tell us that we are not lost to death through sin. We are not lost in suffering and brokenness. **Life came through death.** Life came through sacrifice. Reflect on the sacrifice, mourn the loss of life but then also remember that we gained an Advocate, we gained a Savior, we gained life, through the gift of God's grace and Jesus sacrifice.

In this season of reflection, take time to pray, take time to meditate on the Word of God, take time to think about the mission of the church and the role that you play. Ask yourself, is the church in need of a restoration? Am I in need of a restoration? **Take time to think about what you gained in Jesus Christ upon the cross.** Allow this season of Lent be a time of reflection as you prepare to receive the gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ. Amen.