October Weekly Reflections

Saved by Grace

“Therefore, because people cannot by their own powers live according to the law of God and because all are under sin and guilty of eternal wrath and death, we cannot be set free from sin and be justified through the law…Therefore it follows that personal faith—by which an individual believes that his or her sins are remitted on account of Christ and that God is reconciled and gracious on account of Christ—receives the forgiveness of sins and justifies us.” –Philip Melanchthon writing on behalf of Martin Luther

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus…For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” Romans 3:22-24; 28

This passage from Romans is one of the most famous of the Reformation. Martin Luther struggled greatly with his own sin. He constantly was tallying up what he had done wrong and confessing it, afraid that he would never be able to “make up” for all of his sins. He had always been taught that his salvation was something only he could earn by making himself right with God. In one of his darkest moments of worry and fear about his chances of being saved, these words from Paul in Romans changed everything and helped him to see things differently. He came to believe in a loving God who had already saved him, rather than a God eager to smite him for his sins. As Lutherans, the idea that we have been saved by grace through faith (which is itself a gift from God) is the foundation of our faith.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more than God already does, but there is nothing we can to do to make God love us any less either. God’s love is guaranteed for us no matter what. It is not always easy to remember this—we want to treat others based on their actions toward us and we expect God will do the same because it is hard to imagine another way of living. What can you do this week to remember God’s grace? Think of ways to practice showing grace to yourself and others.

Martin Luther taught that every time we use water, we can remember our baptisms and remember that we are beloved children of God whether we are at our worst or at our best.

Prayer Prompt

* This week when you and your family pray together, try giving thanks to God for the gift of grace and asking God to help you show grace to yourselves and each other this week.

Saint and Sinner – Simul Justus et Peccator

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 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. Romans 7:22-25

Martin Luther believed strongly that all human beings were sinful. He called us “rot-gut sinners.” From Paul’s writings in Romans we can see that Paul believed the same thing. Human beings sin. We make mistakes. We hurt one another, ourselves, creation, and God. Sometimes this hurt is intentional and sometimes it is unintentional. Like Paul says, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Sometimes the hurt we inflict is unconsciously done; whether we react out of anger or fear or stress; we cause hurt without meaning to. As human beings we are sinful creatures and Luther believed that this sin was an innate part of our humanity. But like Paul, Luther knew that sinful as we are God still loves us and God chooses to forgive and to redeem. Even though we are sinners we are also saints because we have been forgiven, justified, redeemed by the love of God found in Jesus Christ. And out of gratitude for this miraculous love that makes us simultaneously saints and sinners (or as Luther put it in Latin “*Simul Justus et Peccator*”) we can all cry out, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Questions for Reflection

* When was a time that you reacted out of anger, fear, or stress and hurt someone without meaning to? How did you experience forgiveness? From the person you hurt? From yourself? From God?
* When people read this Saint and Sinner theology, they sometimes think it means Lutherans can sin without worry and never have to try to be better. Luther would have been disgusted by this interpretation. He believed that even though we are sinful, through our baptisms God is calling us every day to break the cycle of sin in our lives and be guided by the law of God, not the law of sin. How has God’s forgiveness helped you to break away from sin?
* The knowledge that we are all saints and sinners helps me to have compassion and forgiveness for others because I know that I need this compassion and forgiveness just as much as they do. How has the knowledge of your sin and need for forgiveness helped you to forgive others?

Prayer Prompt

* Spend some time talking to God about your sins, the ways you hurt others, yourself, creation, or God. Be sure to thank God for the forgiveness you have received. Then make a commitment not to commit this sin again.

Theology of the Cross and Theology of Glory

“A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it is.”—Martin Luther

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”—1 Corinthians 2:1-2

A theologian is simply someone who thinks about God, so Martin Luther would likely believe that all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, are theologians. But Martin Luther also knew that as humans who are prone to sin, even our thinking about God can be harmed by our sinful selves. He wrote about two kinds of theologians, “a theologian of glory” and a “theologian of the cross.” A theologian of the glory, he says, calls evil good and good evil. In other words, a theologian of glory isn’t thinking about God for the right reasons. A theologian of glory is using their faith for their own advantage or to take advantage of others. A theologian of glory thinks highly of themselves or thinks that their way of thinking about God is the only way and that everyone else is wrong. A theologian of glory thinks they have it all figured out. We are all capable of becoming theologians of glory at times. We want other people to think well of us. We want people to think that we are good at being Christians. We turn our faith into competitions—who knows the Bible best? Who has been a member of the church the longest? When we use God’s name in order to claim power or other advantages for ourselves or to put down other people, we are theologians of glory.

On the other hand, a theologian of the cross puts Jesus and his death and resurrection first in their life. A theologian of the cross knows that they cannot ever know everything about God and is open-minded and compassionate to people with different ideas. A theologian of the cross puts others first and does not use their faith to gain power or other advantages. A theologian of the cross walks with people on their faith journeys and meets people where they are. A theologian of the cross knows that they mess up sometimes or might have it wrong, and they are not afraid of failing because they know God’s grace is for them. Even though we will all fall into the temptation of living like theologians of glory who put ourselves first and God and others last, we are called to be theologians of the cross—knowing that we are sinners who have been saved and eager to tell other people about God’s love—not for our own sake, but the sake of others and all of creation.

This week, look for times you believe God is at work and, as a family, point them out to each other. You could say, “I think God has helped me show kindness even when I was tired” or “I thought of God when I saw two people helping each other at the store.” When we focus on what God is doing for us and among us, we become theologians of the cross. Pray together nightly, thanking God for everything you noticed God doing that day.

Good Works

[Jesus said,] “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

Before the Reformation the Church believed that the way to heaven was through doing good works and living a penitent life. The more good works that you did the more likely it was that you would go to heaven when you died. Luther understood that we could not possibly earn our way into heaven and that we could only go to heaven by the grace of God. It was the grace of God, not our own good works that gave salvation. However, justification by grace through faith apart from works led many people to believe that Luther was giving them a free pass not to do any good works. This of course was not Luther’s intent!

Luther firmly believed that Christians were called to good works. “Further, it is taught that good works should and must be done, not that a person relies on them to earn grace, but for God’s sake and to God’s praise. Faith alone always takes hold of grace and forgiveness of sin. Because the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is also moved to do good works. For before, because it lacks the Holy Spirit, the heart is too weak.” (The Augsburg Confession – German Text Article XX: 27-32)

Good works are not the cause of God’s grace, rather God’s grace is the cause of good works! Experiencing the grace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to do good works. It is the knowledge of the love of God that compels us to love our neighbors and to show this love through good works. Luther believed that true good works (good works done without selfish intent) could only be done through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the presence of God. That’s why the argument in the Augsburg Confession about good works is concluded with John 15:5, “apart from me you can do nothing.” Without God’s grace we cannot do true good works and because of the experience of God’s grace we are called to do good works to share this grace with others.

Questions for reflection

* Luther believed that grace sets us free. Since we no longer have to worry constantly about earning our way into heaven, we are free to love God and others. Do you feel like grace sets you free from sin? How has this grace made a difference in your life?
* When have you felt the love of God so strongly that you needed to share it with someone else?
* What sorts of good works do you feel particularly called to? Feeding ministry? Forming the faith of others? Taking care of creation?

Prayer Prompt

* Spend time giving thanks for the grace and freedom from sin that God gives you. Then ask God to send the Holy Spirit to guide you into how you will share this grace with others through good works. Then make a commitment to God to do these good works!