Romans 3:23-24 In fact, there is no difference, 23because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God 24and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Well, here it is another Reformation celebration for us. Now I think you know that most of the time as I preach I rotate between the various readings for the church year. But honestly, as I looked at the Gospel reading for this Sunday I didn’t have good thoughts. My first thought was that this was more of a Last Judgment text, I could even go more with a Saints Triumphant text, but I just had trouble thinking that the gospel reading was a Reformation text. So after considerable thought, okay, about 10 minutes time, I determined to toss that text aside and find a text that I thought was best for celebrating Reformation Sunday.

Before I decided on a text I asked myself, what I thought was a good question: “What does it mean to be a Lutheran?” You see, there is a point to that label Lutheran. Being a Lutheran means something. It identifies that we have specific beliefs and teachings that we clearly base on the Holy Scriptures. That’s the next thing about us Lutherans, we believe absolutely that the Bible is the very Word of God. Now mind you, we base our teachings on what that written Bible clearly and precisely says. We do not believe in some “inner” Word, where God speaks to you and tells you things. I can’t find a single passage where God tells me this is going to happen for us today. My biggest problem with this idea of God speaking directly to us is that the various churches that teach this all have different doctrines here and there, as if God is somehow confused and not sure of what to tell us. Nope, the written Word of God, the Bible is the only thing that counts.

As a Lutheran I believe that God loves everyone. Yes, he loves every single soul with all his heart. But make no mistake. God in his love sent His Son to die for your sins and when you refuse to believe in this awesome gift of God, God who is love, is also perfectly just and right. He says that if you refuse to believe in Jesus, you refuse to be a repentant sinner, if you decide that you are greater and superior to God you are going to be condemned. The sad part is that you don’t have to be. Because for the rest of this sermon we are going to talk about the greatest teaching that can be found in Scripture, the heart and core of our Lutheran faith. We are going to talk about **“We Are Justified in Christ.”**

If you don’t mind I want to start by referencing a question and answer of our Lutheran Catechism, the Kuske Revised Edition. It is actually question 251. I think this question and its answer is one of the best ways to journey into exactly what it means to be “justified.” That question is: “How does God forgive sin? Here is the answer. We are really going to pay attention to this answer. “God forgives sins like a judge in a courtroom who tells a criminal that there is no longer any charge against him, and so declares him innocent or not guilty. (declare righteous, justify).

Let’s talk about that answer. First, if you have ever been in a courtroom, you know how impressive the judge’s bench is made to look. Now imagine you are in God’s courtroom. The majestic God must surely have a most impressive courtroom. I can tell you I can’t imagine being there and not being filled with total fear. You know when you are there, this is it! Whatever is thundered down at you is the final answer: the forever answer. Yes, God is the judge. He has determined what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. His utter perfection will make no mistakes. In this courtroom there will be no appeal and there will be no argument of what is and what isn’t fact.

The most frightening part of this answer is the part that says, “who tells a criminal.” Understand the implications of that phrase. It is clear you are guilty. You already have multiple counts of sin and evil against you. Everything is admissible as evidence. For that matter, God thunders to his angels: “Bring in the evidence!” At the far end of the room a set of huge double doors bangs open and the biggest fork lift you have ever seen comes in carrying a 10 x 10 box filled with hundreds of large books. These books contain a record of every single thing that stands against you. A record of thought, word and deed that is flawless and totally accurate. But wait, ten more boxes are brought in! Every single wrong: big, little, indifferent, thoughtless, careless, even unknown to you. But God is fair. He thunders to the next angel, “Bring in the record of good deeds!” In walks an angel holding a very tattered, pocket spiral notebook. Two pages left. Two things written down. Now comes the reckoning!

Let’s start by understanding what happens with the unbeliever first. God says, “Let’s see what we can find!” He goes through every book, sees every fault and grasps every evil. Each book after it is looked at is placed on a balance scale before God. The one side after the first two boxes is heavily weighted down. After all the books are looked at and put on the scale, a vast load weighing tons, the Lord asks for the good stuff. That small spiral notebook is placed on the other side of the balance scale. Not a thing happens. The evidence is weighed and you are indeed found guilty. Your evil deeds far outweigh the only two things found in your life that God could count as good. Hell is all yours and God is not at fault.

But now comes the reckoning for the believer in Jesus. God thunders, “Let’s see what we can find.” But almost immediately Jesus, your lawyer, stands up and says, “Dad, this is one of mine!” The great Judge reaches down and puts on a pair of glasses with deep red lenses. The books are brought to him. The books are all written in red. He sees nothing in them. Not a single book gets put on the scale. All because of Jesus. And then God asks: “Where is the good stuff.” That tattered pocket spiral notebook with its two pathetic good deeds, now looks like a huge gold covered book completely filled in, margins, pages, every writable place! These deeds are written in black. The Lord looks and simply remarks, “Well, done, thou good and faithful Servant. You are perfect in every way! Enter into my Heaven!”

You see, it all happens in Jesus. Because Jesus has paid for your sins there is absolutely no charge against you. There is only a pronouncement of innocence, declared righteous, justified in Jesus. Yet I would tell you more. Let’s next consider question 252. “On what basis did God declare guilty sinners to be righteous?” The answer: “God declared guilty sinners to be righteous because Jesus served as their substitute and paid for their sins in full.”

Here is how I illustrate this truth. Let’s say that for every sin you commit, whether in thought, word or deed, you are going to get seriously jabbed with a pencil. Let’s be conservative. Let’s just say that every day we are convicted of only 200 sins. If multiplied out, that means I need to endure 4,964,000 encil jabs! I can’t die. I can’t whimper! Yet I will tell you after the first one, I want to be done! It is clear that I cannot survive and I cannot win. But rules are rules, I get strapped down and just before the switch to start the machine doing the work starts going, a voice is heard to cry out, “Stop!”

It is Jesus. He takes my place. He takes upon himself every single jab that should have been mine. I endure nothing. He endures everything! I suffer not one tiny scratch. He takes my whole punishment and says not a thing. He lives. He wins. He takes it all on my behalf. He is my substitute.

The Father looks at me and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You are perfect in every way. Enter into my heaven!”

I am sorry. Some of you here have heard this story before and I am sure I have bored you to death. I don’t mean to, I just want you to grasp the wonder and total beauty of what Jesus has done. That’s why He went to the cross. That’s why God the Father sent him. Jesus came to pay for our sins. But that also means that our next question and answer is very important.

That question and answer is this: “How many people did God declare righteous?” The answer here is of utmost importance. “God declared all people righteous.” Please note that this is known as objective justification. Just so you know, objective means that it is a fact outside of you. It is a truth that is simply truth. Like one and one is two. Or like there is a sun that is the center of our solar system. Now when it comes to objective facts you can do one of two things. You can deny it. That doesn’t make the objective fact wrong it just means you have refused to see the truth. Or you can believe it and let the truth impact your life.

Jesus died for the sins of all people. Yes, every single soul that ever existed, does exists or will exists has had Jesus pay for their sins. That is important to know. By the way, if you taught, as some do, that Jesus died only for the sins of believers, then the next question you have to ask is “How do I know I am a believer?” The only answer you will be able to come up with is that you have loved Jesus, you obey him, you follow His Word and you have good works. Really? You think you are going to be saved by your works? That is not what God’s Word says. Go back to our courtroom scene, the one without Jesus. Your sins will easily and totally outweigh any good works you could have. No Jesus, no salvation. That simple.

Yet Jesus did die for everyone’s sins. The crux of it all is that we are to believe in Jesus. To grasp the wonder of what God did in Jesus and let that move and motivate our lives. It is clear that I can’t save myself. It is clear that I can’t measure up to God’s demand that I be totally perfect. Adam and Eve saw to that. They brought sin into the world. They passed that sin on to each of us. But God’s plan was to save the world. He sent Jesus. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not and then went to the cross to be our substitute. There on the cross he paid for our sins. Let that sink in. For everyone’s sins. There were no exceptions, every single soul had their sins paid for.

But without Jesus we will stand before God under the full weight and demands of the law. Just one little flaw, just one little disobedience and you are had. “How unfair,” you may claim! But in truth, there isn’t a single person who has only one little flaw. We are embroiled in sin. We sin on a regular basis. We are so immersed in sin that we think nothing of rejecting God, laughing at His Word, deciding we have greater wisdom and knowledge. We hear how God sacrificed His Son for us and we scorn Him. What a fool this Jesus was. What a joke, to so care for us when our nature is not to care for Him. But God still sent Him. Still had Him die for us. All of this so that instead of having to be perfect and flawless in life, all we had to do was trust in what Jesus did. Trust that because of Jesus, forgiveness and eternal life, yes, the wonder of spending eternity with God is ours just because of Jesus. That is what faith is about. Faith that believes we are justified by Jesus, saved by what He has done for us.

Then comes our final and the most joyful question. Q255. “Why is it important, then, that the Holy Spirit work faith in me?” Do you get this? Faith is the key and God the Father and Jesus have sent the Holy Spirit into our lives to grant us the gift of faith. The answer: “It is important that the Holy Spirit work faith in me so that I do not trust in my own works but only in the righteousness God gives me by grace in Christ. Please note that this is known as subjective justification.

Remember when we spoke of “objective justification?” We said this was a truth that was truth outside of us and always true. So God sent his Son and God has declared: All sins are forgiven in Jesus!” Here we are at subjective justification. Fact is, you can either believe what God has declared or you can reject what God has declared. When we reject it, we are literally rejecting God’s love and grace for our lives. But when we believe what God has done and declared we understand, “My sins are forgiven in Jesus!” Why, because God says so! This is what we are to believe. “My sins are forgiven in Jesus!” This is what makes this faith so unique and wonderful. “My sins are forgiven in Jesus!” There is no doubt, no worry, and no second guessing. God has done it all in Jesus. Our only call as Christians is to believe: My sins are forgiven in Jesus!

There it is. The heart of being Lutheran! Jesus is everything. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus has changed my life because He died for me. It is all about Jesus. His righteousness for me. He love for me. His pouring out his grace and salvation just so I could get the simple truth. God’s Son is my Savior. He is your Savior. Please know, that in Jesus, and only in Jesus, you are forgiven. You have been made His child and you don’t look to yourself, you look always to Him. Thank goodness that this wonderful truth of God Word has been restored to us in this festival of Reformation. Amen!