

The Festival of the Reformation [observed] • October 26, 2014

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28

“Beggars”

“We are beggars. This is true.” These were the last words that Dr. Martin Luther penned before his death two days later, in 1546. He had traveled to his hometown of Eisleben to bring reconciliation in an inheritance dispute between two brothers. While he did succeed in that effort, his poor health finally gave out on him. He fell asleep in the name Christ in that same village where he had been born and baptized into Christ. Luther's last written words concluded some ponderings he'd been putting to paper about how no one could really ever have studied God's Word enough to have no further need of it. As he saw things, no matter how great a biblical scholar you might be, the Scriptures will always have more to offer. Luther, too, was a beggar, coming to God to receive more and more of what he needed for life – in this age and in the age to come.

But who would want to be a beggar? You've seen beggars. Sometimes they're panhandling at an intersection, maybe holding up a sign that describes their need. Others might have come up to you on the street when you're walking downtown, asking you if you could spare a few dollars. How does that make you feel? Upset? Nervous? Suspicious? The beggar on the street corner might not, in fact, be homeless; they could be taking advantage of the kindness of strangers. Who's to say that a beggar that comes up to ask you for money is actually going to spend it on food or gas and not something else? If you just assume a beggar is not worthy of your trust ahead of time, it's that much easier to ignore them. And once you've ignored them, it's that much easier to forget them.

We live in a place where people generally believe that you have to make your own way in the world. That being the case, a beggar shouldn't be begging. **They're asking for something on which they have absolutely no claim.** Such a person should have a job. They should be earning a living and taking care of themselves like you do, like your friends and family do. That's how life works. But what if the tables were turned?

If you were to find yourself in a position of need, with nothing to eat and no place to stay, why should someone help you? Because it's the right thing to do? Because you're worthy of their assistance? Most of us have not had to face that kind of dire situation. But still we each have needs and desires that we often expect other people to address. Put another way, you could say that we exhibit a sense of entitlement. By virtue of self-worth, we assume that we're owed something from other people, or even from God.

This is the nature of our world: someone begging is offensive and wrong, because they're not carrying their own weight; however, you should be entitled to others' support when and where you need it (or want it). Is that the nature of your relationship with God?

Ask yourself if, deep down, you believe that you're a good person and that that's enough to entitle you to God's love and His forgiveness. Or do you feel that if you do enough good things in your life that you'll be OK with God – or, at least, He won't be angry with you? The world around us certainly encourages you to think this way. But where does that leave you? How can you be both inherently worthy of – entitled to – a right relationship with God *and* be required to do certain things or live a certain way to get God's favor? Well, God says you aren't *either!* And where does *that* leave you?

As St. Paul conveys our human situation in Romans 3, there's nothing about us that can make a claim to a right relationship with God. The law to which Paul refers is everything that puts God's instruction before us and then shows us how we have fallen short. It silences our arguments of being a “good enough” person or of doing “good enough” works. We are people who are completely broken by our sin, completely separated from God. Compared with the perfect standards of God's law, you and I are all offenders, liable to punishment: that's the only thing to which we are entitled. Even considering just our often-narrow focus on our own wants with disregard for other people's needs, we haven't earned anything else. Our only hope for any other possible relationship with God is in realizing what we are before Him: **we are beggars.**

God is holy, so how could sin-sick beggars expect anything other than judgment and punishment before Him? Martin Luther long struggled with the concept of God's righteousness. Can a holy God just look the other way for all the wrong we've done? Through Paul, God answered this question. No, God's righteousness demanded payment for our sin; but His righteousness also saw to it that He would be the one to pay for that sin.

Standing before God with nothing to offer, knowing that we're not entitled to life, knowing that we can't earn God's favor, **we're asking for something on which we have absolutely no claim.** And God gives it, because He loves us. Broken and sin-sick beggars that we are, the Father looks at you and me and sees His Son, welcoming us into redeemed life, life which we don't deserve, but life which we desperately need. With Luther, look to Jesus for God's righteousness.

In Jesus, the Lamb of God, God gives you something better than a hand-out. He gives you something better than a hand-up. He gives you Himself. God's holiness and judgment were faced in their fullness by His Son on the cross for you and for me, because God's righteousness is also shown in His grace. He doesn't ignore all those voices pleading for forgiveness and freedom from the brokenness of the life this world offers. He doesn't turn away and forget us in our need. In Jesus, Luther realized, we see the depth and wideness of God's grace, giving us the good we do not deserve and have not earned. Even though we are asking for something on which we have absolutely no claim, Jesus gives it to us as a gift. He gives himself up so that we might have life, life which does not run out.

There's a particularly significant point here, one which Paul takes care to lift up: God didn't ignore the sin of the world, or even the sin of the faithful in the Old Testament era. He temporarily "passed over" them until the time was complete; then He put the entirety of that sin on Jesus. Jesus offered himself up as the innocent Lamb of God whose sacrifice would make possible the final victory over humanity's separation from God, the final victory over death.

With Luther and all the rest of those who believe in God's grace in Christ, look to Jesus, the Lamb, to deliver victory for you. As he recounted his vision in Revelation 14, we heard John tell of an angel proclaiming the eternal Gospel from the zenith of the sky, its brightness shining down as the noonday sun. That Good News is Jesus' faithfulness for and to all who believe it. God's gift of faith allows us to see Christ as the victor that he is. As the perfect sacrifice that does infinitely more than our good works or self-worth could ever hope to accomplish, Jesus is the one who stands before the Father on behalf of all the saints of God – us beggars – so that we would get what we need and not what we deserve.

So how might this Good News of Jesus shape your day, your week, your year? What will you do now with the life that you've been given in the eternal Gospel? Here at St. John's, we've just come off of three weeks in considering temptations of stewardship that each of us faces when we forget our dependence on God – when we forget that we are beggars. As you consider how to use the gifts that Jesus has won for you, remember that he has carried your burden to get you a right relationship with God. There's nothing more left for you to do. You're free to use what you've got in response to the Gospel, hearing the angel's call and invitation to worship the Lamb, especially in those ways in which God has uniquely equipped you.

If you're Martin Luther, that might mean devoting your life to the study and proclamation of God's Word in the Scriptures. Most of us are not Martin Luther. But as Christians who share this Lutheran confession of our faith, we do have an eternal Gospel to deliver to our world, the Good News that points to Jesus alone as our hope and our Savior. The burden of a right relationship with God isn't on our shoulders; Jesus carries it all. We turn to him, asking for something on which we have absolutely no claim, and he gives us everything.

We are beggars. This is true. And thanks be to God for it!

Amen.