Changed
Romans 3:19-28

Introduction
In 1918, a notorious Japanese criminal named Tokichi Ishii was sentenced to hang. While in prison in Tokyo, two American missionaries serving in Japan at the time, sent him a New Testament. I couldn't find their first names, but throughout the story they are referred to as Miss West and Miss McDonald.

After a period of time, Miss West was able to visit him. While there she suggested that he read the story of Jesus and His crucifixion with her. When he reached the point where Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," something "clicked" within Ishii's heart. He wrote:

> "I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did this verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it.
>
> I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed. People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size, I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God."

When Mr. Ishii finally stood on the scaffold with the noose around his neck, with great earnestness he spoke his last words: "My soul, now purified, today returns to the City of God."

The Word of God was sown into this man's life and he underwent a big change.

As we continue on our current quest to identify to prepare for the return of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that a changed life is the central piece in our "being ready." That change is central to the theme of every Reformation Sunday, a difference that can be summed up in the words read to you moments ago:

> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

Ever since Adam and Eve got themselves evicted from the Garden of Eden, people in this earthly kingdom have been searching for the key that would allow them to re-establish a right relationship with God. Every day Adam and Eve walked and talked with their Creator. Every day, that is, until sin entered the picture. And in the eating of the apple, all that was lost. The relationship was damaged. From that moment on, all of humanity has been looking for the way back to a personal and meaningful relationship with God.

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One of the greatest of the early church fathers, St. Augustine is credited with saying:

> O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. (St. Augustine of Hippo)

You see, deep within every human being is the sense that our lives can never be fully complete and whole until we find our way back into a right relationship with our God. And so we search.

- Some try to find that sense of wholeness through drugs or alcohol.
- Some through pornography or other immoral actions and habits.
- Some through their appearance, or their possessions, or their titles.

People have tried everything under the sun. With my Friday morning Bible study group, I am reading the Book of Ecclesiastes. In that book you hear about one man's search to find the meaning of life! If you live your life like he did, you will discover what he discovered – that eventually all our efforts to find wholeness and completeness apart from a restored relationship with God is meaningless, a mere chasing after the wind.

> *I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:14)*

Some five hundred years ago a monk by the name of Martin Luther found himself experiencing the same struggle. He had turned away from possible careers in the law and medicine to enter the monastery and to become a professor of theology, And yet this highly devout man, despite his adherence to all the teachings of his faith, could not find the wholeness and completeness he sought in his relationship with God. Nothing worked.

He describes it like this:

> *Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. (Luther's Works, Volume 34, P336-337)*.

Luther went on:

> *At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' "*

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That is Romans 1:17.

> *There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again … (Luther's Works, Volume 34, P336-337).*

He had found the key. The way to escape a life of shame and guilt was found in a faithful response to what God had done through the death of Jesus on the cross. That's what "justified" means. By the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, God reached out the all of humanity and made possible the restoration of a relationship with the Creator:

> *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:22-24)*

The church of Luther's day didn't teach this truth. The church taught that the way to restoration was by adherence to the teachings of the church and the paying of indulgences. Luther had done all of that, and he knew it was:

> *… meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:14)*

And so on October 31, 1517 – a day we celebrate today – Luther invited his fellow theologians to engage in a conversation about what he now understood. Instead of celebrating this newly re-found truth, the church … eventually branded him as a heretic and excommunicated him.

But Luther remained convinced. He wrote:

> *This doctrine [justification by faith] is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour… Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater . . . For when this article has been taken away, nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry, although it may seem to be the height of truth, worship of God, holiness, etc.…"If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time.*

And today people of faith – including the people of this congregation – continue to believe that this is the key to it all.

Let's sum it all up in these five statements from today's three texts:

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#1: We all have sinned

> … for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)

Sin is a universal problem. No one is exempt from experiencing it. You are immune because of social, economic, or educational status. "Hi, my name is Tom and I am a sinner." Fill in your own name.

#2: Sin has consequences

> *…everyone who sins is a slave to sin. (John 8:34)*

Our sin problem enslaves us to an evil master – the devil himself. And no matter how hard we try we continue to repeat the same self-destructive behaviors over and over again.

We may put up a good front but if our hearts haven't been changed it is only a front.

#3: Jesus Christ can set you free from sin and its consequences

> *If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36)*

By His death, burial and resurrection, Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for our sin. We do not have to be bound by our sins any more. We can be free to live as God intended us to live and, better yet, we can live with heaven in mind.

#4: The key to it all is faith in Jesus Christ

> *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law … This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:20, 22)*

To all who believe. Not to some, but to all who believe that Jesus died for their sins and who confess Him as their Lord and Savior.

#5: Our relationship with God is restored

> *"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)*

Such wonderful truths here: "I will be their God" and "they will know me."

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APPLICATION
509 years ago Martin Luther nailed 95 points of debate on the doors of Christ Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Those statements outlined the core truth of the Gospel; namely, that the key to our walk with God lies not in our own ability to make it happen … not in the errant belief that the laws and dictates of a denomination can open the door for us … but solely and firmly believing in our hearts that our right standing before God is based on the work of Jesus on our behalf. The Reformers and those that came after them framed in in the terms of five "solas." That Latin word means "alone."

Sola Gratia Sola Fide Solus Christus Sola Scriptura Soli Deo Gloria

God's grace alone as the only way to be reconciled to God, faith alone as the only means of receiving God's grace, Christ alone as the ground of God's saving grace, Scripture alone as the only infallible authority for belief, and God's glory alone as the ultimate purpose for the lives of men and women. That is the key, and that is what we proclaim.

When Luther was called to task for teaching this, the authorities demanded he recant. He declined, and according to the legend of the church, said

> I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.

Most Lutheran scholars don't believe he actually said that anymore. But he lived it. And he taught it.

And we still do too.

Amen.

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