

Romans 3:19-28

The first time I heard the verse from Romans 3:23 I was insulted. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." That was when I was convinced that because of Jesus I no longer sinned, because didn't Jesus say in John 8:36 "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."? I was wrong. I came to realize that even though Jesus has taken away the sin I still sin. I was reading a sermon written by Rev. Scott Suskovic on sermons.com that explained how I can sin and still be sin free.

I've been listening to a book series, novels written by Lisa Gardener about Frankie Elkins, a woman who searches for lost people. Frankie also happens to be an alcoholic. It is through her character that I have come to understand alcoholism, and, even though I have no experience in addictions (although I was once a smoker), I believe it may be the same for other addictions.

That is where the sermon by Rev. Suskovic made it clear about how everyone sins... he used addiction to alcohol as an illustration. He spoke of how he attended AA meetings as a pastor accompanying a church member, and as most of us are aware, they begin with a person standing and introducing themselves by saying, "I am *name*, and I am an alcoholic. I have been sober for *as long as they have not drunk alcohol*." He noticed that the person never said, "I was an alcoholic" or "I am a recovering alcoholic", they call themselves an alcoholic because it is a daily struggle each one of them face. It is different from being addicted to cigarettes. Honestly, after over 25 years of not smoking I do not want to even be near the smell of cigarette smoke, unlike an alcoholic who, if the fictional character Frankie Elkins is anywhere near reality (and I believe her to be so) the crave for alcohol never ceases.

So what does this have to do with us being sinners? Like an alcoholic we will always have the urge to sin, it is a constant fight which we often lose. And like an alcoholic who follows AA we depend on a higher power, in our case it is God, to give us strength not to give in. Yet we are blessed by the grace of God to turn to the one who grants forgiveness and wipes away our sin, Jesus the Christ. The difference between us being sinners and non-sinners is grace. It isn't anything we do all by ourselves. That is where the law that the apostle Paul was writing about comes into play... we know by the law that we have sinned. And if it were our strength, we would follow the law and never sin. But the laws (which I'm going to encapsulate as the 10 Commandments) are written to let us know what we should not be doing, they don't give us the strength not to do it, that comes from God.

Yet we find ourselves turning away from God. I know one time there was an instance I prayed for direction, asked God to give me a Bible passage to follow, opened my Bible to what I later found was exactly what I should have listened to but said, "God, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to listen to this." God did not desert me; God stayed with me through the pain that followed because of my decision and used that experience so that I can help others who go through the same. God is good. God gets us through the times we refuse to listen.

Martin Luther had a realization of our experience with God when on a winter day he went to feed the birds in his yard. The birds were all gathered there until Luther went out with food for them and even though he was bringing them something they needed, they flew away. Luther wrote that we are like the birds, even when God is bringing something good to us we turn the other way. Of course the birds returned to eat when Luther left,

and we, after we have realized our mistake of turning away, come back through the grace of God given to us through Jesus the Christ.

If you know anything about the reformer, the father of the protestant church, you know that Martin Luther struggled with his faith. He was constantly berating himself because he could not have a strong enough faith, nothing he was doing was making his faith any stronger. There is a great story about how Luther dealt with this long list of sins. Evidently, one night he had a nightmare in which the devil took out this huge book full of Luther's sins. They were itemized, numbered, and dated. The sheer size and numbers were overwhelming. The weight of the sins drove Luther to his knees in despair. As the devil completed his evidence against a nervous and contrite Luther, Luther suddenly realized something and said, "You forgot a few." With that he added more and more to the list provided by the devil and then wrote on the bottom, "Paid in full by Jesus Christ."

Our good works do not set us free from our sin. Our acts of kindness do not set us free from our sin. Our tithing does not set us free from our sin. Does that mean that we should not do good works? Does that mean we should not do random acts of kindness? Does that mean we shouldn't give what we can, striving for 10% to the works of the church? No. It simply means we realize that God is taking care of us. That, because God is watching over us in the good times and in the bad, we have the ability and the responsibility to care for others.

The fictional character Frankie Elkins searched for missing people, realizing she lived each day at a time with her addiction to alcohol that she herself had no way to keep herself from taking a drink. She looked at it one day at a time. That is a good way to consider our reformation theology. Luther knew that every day is a battle between being a saint or a sinner. Every morning he waged a war by beginning each day with a prayer and the sign of the cross as a means of confessing our sinful nature before God, while at the same time receiving the forgiveness that comes only through the grace of God given to us in Jesus the Christ. One day at a time recommitting ourselves to walking in the freedom of the gospel.

When Paul laid out the reality that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, it was not meant to be the final word. These words are only the means that move us forward to hear what we celebrate on this Reformation Day:

[We] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins ... for we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law. (Romans 3:24, 25, 28)

It all begins today with the very first step. Hello, my name is Karen, and I am a sinner who is in bondage to sin and cannot free myself. But thanks be to God who has called me through the gospel, enlightened me by the Spirit, and who has set me free as a saint through the cross of Jesus Christ.

All glory be to God! Amen.