

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 16, 2014

Text: Romans 4:1–8, 13–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What is bottom line Christianity? It's sometimes helpful to think about things according to their most basic essence. What is the one thing that makes Christianity, Christianity? That is, if you took that one thing away, it would cease to be Christian and become something else.

So, what is bottom line Christianity? The teachings of Jesus? Good answer but many of Jesus' teachings can be found in other world religions. Morality, living according to the 10 Commandments? Another good try but the morality of the 10 Commandments can be found in other religions as well. Miracles? Other religions claim miraculous events. God becoming a man? There are pagan myths telling stories about the gods becoming human. God dying and coming back to life? Again, there are similar stories in other religions.

So what is it? The Biblical answer, both in Old and New Testaments, is *God justifying the sinner*. The word "justify" simply means to declare righteous so that one stands favorably before God in all things. That's what makes Christianity, Christianity. Without this core teaching, Christianity ceases to exist. The sad truth is that many confessing Christians don't seem to realize this most important kernel of truth. God graciously justifies the guilty sinner.

I've already said that other religions have stories about the gods becoming human. What makes the Son of God becoming man unique, according to the Bible, is that He becomes human for the purpose of justifying sinners. The same is true for Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus did these things for the sole purpose of justifying sinners. No other world religion teaches this; it's unique to Christianity.

We see this bottom-line teaching, in all three of today's readings. Look first at Romans 4:3, "For what does the Scripture say, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" The OT reading from Genesis 12 is the historic narrative of Abraham believing God's Word and promise. In the Gospel reading, the

justification of the sinner is found in John 3:16–17, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Through simple faith and trust, sinners believe God’s promise that He will justify them in His sight. This most important teaching finds its greatest expression in and through Jesus; that is, God the Father justifies the sinner through faith in the crucified and resurrected Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. You remove that teaching from Christianity and it ceases to be Christianity. Period. No exception or caveats. That’s bottom-line Christianity.

Abraham serves as the greatest OT pattern. In today’s OT reading, Abram –the Lord later changed his name to Abraham – hears the Lord’s call to leave his home and journey to “the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). With the command to leave the security of house and home, also comes the divine promise to make of him “a great nation” (Gen 12:2). It’s an almost ridiculous scene. Genesis 11 tells us that Sarah, Abraham’s wife, is barren. They don’t have any children. How would the Lord make a great nation of a man married to a barren wife? There’s another difficulty. Abraham is about 75 years old and Sarah about 65 years old. Can any of you imagine thinking about starting a family at that time of life?

We might ask ourselves why God chose Abraham. Was he somehow more righteous than other men? The Bible never describes Abraham in such terms. What the Bible does reveal is that he had some great moments of faith and devotion (you might think of his intercession for Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18) coupled with some rather embarrassing moments (you might think of when he lied about being married to Sarah in order to save his own neck, twice in Gen. 12 & 20). He grew up in a pagan nation surrounded by pagan gods. For all we know, he worshipped those pagan idols before the Lord called him to follow Him to the land of Canaan.

In other words, Abraham was a sinner, no more righteous than anyone else. And the one true God of heaven and earth called Abraham to faith in Him. Genesis 15:6 says, “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” That’s the verse that St. Paul is quoting in Romans 4:3. Abraham believed God’s promise to raise up a faithful people through him who stand justified before God simply through faith and trust in God’s love and grace. No works but simple trust. Look at Romans 4:5, “And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his

faith is counted as righteousness...” Bottom-line Christianity is the greatest message on earth! God justifies the ungodly through faith in Jesus!!

Paul continues to make this point all the more clear and glorious. Look at Romans 4:13, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir to the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”

Justification, that is righteousness before God, does NOT come through the keeping of the law, the 10 commandments. It comes through faith in the God who justifies the sinner graciously and freely for the sake of Jesus.

Let’s make this a bit more personal. Your standing before God is established either by your own good works or by faith in God’s promise. In other words, it’s either your work – 100% or it’s God’s work – 100%. But it can’t be both. Too often you hear people say that Christianity is about living a good, moral life. That Christianity’s essence is to relieve the poor and afflicted (a good thing to do), to work for social justice and prosperity (another good thing), to build strong families (a great thing), etc. You can work as diligently as you think possible in these various good things but you will not be able to stand before God justified because of them. Look at vs. 14–15, “For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs (i.e., recipients of Abraham’s blessings), faith is null and the promise void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”

You can either base your standing before God on the works of the law or on the promise of faith. If you trust in works, faith is null, nothing and the divine promise is voided for you. But if you trust in the mercy and grace of a God who justifies sinners, then the promise of salvation, an eternal inheritance, and all divine blessings remain in full effect. So concludes Paul in vs. 16, “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring...” Christianity depends on faith in the God who justifies sinners not sinners who justify themselves.

All of you are beautiful, saintly people. And I call you saints of God of often as I can in order to emphasize your standing before God. As good as you people are, I do not call you saints because of your good works (and I know a good deal about some of your good works). I call you saints because of your faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. He is the one who justifies sinners.

But there is a catch of sorts in this bottom-line teaching of Christianity. I kind of glossed over it earlier. Look back at vs. 5, “And to the one who does not work but

trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” This promise and assurance of salvation through divine justification is earmarked only for the ungodly, for sinners. Bottom-line Christianity is for sinners. The Church and everything we do here is for ungodly sinners. That’s the catch. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, the ungodly, the lawbreakers, the unholy.

Nicodemus, the Pharisees in today’s gospel reading from John 3, thought he could come to Jesus as a fellow adherent and keeper of the Law. Jesus would not have it. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3). Jesus systematically dismantles Nicodemus’ religion of good works. The kingdom of God is for born again sinners, redeemed by a crucified and resurrected Savior. “How can these things be?” cries Nicodemus (Jn 3:9). The Lord’s answer is earth-shattering. John 3:14–15, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

The ungodly are declared righteous and given eternal life through faith in Jesus. Period. That’s the bottom-line. Your salvation is pure gift motivated solely by divine love. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16–17).

This church is for justified sinners. This Jesus, whom we preach and who is the recipient of our worship and devotion, is the Savior of sinners. Today and forever you stand righteous before God the Father through faith in that divine Savior. You are the blessed ones. Through faith in Jesus you are declared righteous, pure, holy, and well-pleasing.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.