

Vicar Andrew Wolfgram
Text: Romans 3:19-28
Date: October 30, 2016
Setting: Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

‘But I was just...’

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

But I was just... That seems to be a phrase that you never seem to grow out of. When little Billy was caught pushing over Joey on the playground, Billy immediately says, ‘but I was just’... The words to follow were typically a story of everything that lead up to the pushing. It somehow wasn’t Billy’s fault but another kids fault. Middle school comes and the 7th grader is caught texting and checking Facebook on their phone during class. Their excuse is ‘but I was just’... This happens to adults as well. You’re pulled over for speeding, crossing the median, using your cell phone, or forgetting to use your seatbelt. When we use the phrase, ‘But I was just,’ we try to make whatever it was that we did seem smaller than it actually was. You may have totaled your car when you were a teenager, but when you were on the phone with your parents you said it was only a tiny scratch.

We look back to our parents, Adam and Eve who sinned in the garden. When God asked Adam what he did, the excuse was, ‘but I was just’... and then Adam finds an excuse after fumbling over his words and says “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:12) When God asked Eve why she ate the fruit she responded saying, ‘but I was just...’ and also trips over her words and finally says, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:13)

As our first parents used these words in the garden, we share in the words ‘But I was just.’ We have found other phrases to use. Our line switches from ‘but I was just’, as a way to

escape a punishment, to 'look at what I did.' Look at this great thing that I did. Look at my perfect church attendance. Look at how I helped with that community event. Look at what I did for the neighbor down the street who needed my help. Look at all the ways I am great. Look at what I did.

Funny how when we are caught doing something that we aren't supposed to do, we want to shed that responsibility of our actions. We try to make it smaller than it is? But when we're doing something good, we want people to take notice, don't we? True, we may not be arrogant about what we do. We may not run to our nearest neighbor and show them, but deep down we may think to ourselves, if only someone saw the good thing that I did. We try to make it as big as we possibly can. It's like the typical fishing story. The fish was this big. Then the next time you tell the story, the fish was **THIS** big. And then finally, after telling the story repeatedly, the fish was **THIS** big.

We are experts at making the failures of our lives appear smaller than they are and the things we consider good deeds bigger than they deserve.

Our reading from Romans today says, "*Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*" (Romans 3:19-20)

When a parent hears the excuse of 'But I was just', the parent typically says I don't want to hear it, not another word. That is the way that God is with us. Every mouth will be stopped. This not only goes for the things that we try to make smaller and hide, but the things that we boast about. When we say, 'Look at what I did.'

Instead, we are asked to listen, not speak. God tells us, “But I was just.” He executed the justice that our sins, every single sin we do, deserved. As a judge makes a good ruling in court, God was just. He justly put the punishment that was on you and me on someone. He put this punishment on someone else. He put this punishment on His Only Son, Jesus Christ.

When we point to the good things we do, God says, “Look at what I did” and points us to the cross of Christ.

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Romans 3:21-22a)

We aren’t saved by making our sins smaller than they are. Likewise, we are not saved by the good things that we do for one another. The things we make bigger than they deserve.

“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:22b-25a)

Christ appeased the punishment that God the Father required. He appeased this with His own precious blood. He appeased it with His own suffering and death. The justice that God executed upon Christ was not for some sins but for ALL sins.

“This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:25b-26)

So that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

When God says, 'but I was just', He is showing us yet again that he is the Just one. He has the authority to do whatever He wants. We are declared justified, declared righteous, because of what Christ has done.

That was the central point of the Lutheran Reformation 499 years ago. It is that central point that we celebrate today. What Martin Luther wanted to make known to those in his care. Not what we do for God, but what God has done for each and every one of us.

God points to the cross and says, 'Look at what I did, what I did for you, because I love you. Your sins deserve punishment, and my only Son bore the weight of your sin so that you could be with me. He went to the cross for your sins and died for you, and then rose on the third day for you.'

But I was just. Look at what I did. For you. Amen.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

Ephesians 3:20-21