

“Pondering the Solas, Part II: *Sola Fide*”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 15th 2017 (19th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Psalm 27

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.*

--Psalm 27:3

Roughly 15 years ago—the exact date evades me!—I was privileged not only to meet but to have dinner with the remarkable individual whose photo graces our sanctuary screens. Jarsolav Pelikanⁱ—the 20th century’s most distinguished historian of Christianity—was giving the annual Peter Kay Lectures at the Vancouver School of Theology. Phil Spencer and I attended...and when I was chosen to be the person to thank Professor Pelikan at the conclusion of the final lecture, Phil and I were also invited to dine with him. As my fuzzy brain seeks to recall that conversation at the distance of a decade and a half, the one thing I remember quite clearly was my asking Pelikan about his recent conversion.

Pelikan, you see, was a life-long Lutheran. Baptized a Lutheran and ordained a Lutheran, Pelikan—early on in his scholarly career— was, in fact, part of a team that oversaw the translation into English of the complete works of Martin Luther: the first (and to the best of my knowledge) still the only time anyone has attempted such a feat. In addition, one of Pelikan’s earliest books was an analysis of Luther’s characteristic way of interpreting scripture. Nevertheless, over the years—partly driven by the fact that his research interests shifted from the Reformation to the Early Church Fathers, and partly driven by the fact that his ethnic background was Eastern European—Pelikan found himself drawn to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Finally, well into his 70s, he made the leap from the Lutheran Church to the Orthodox Church and—in the process—raised a number of eyebrows on the Protestant side of the divide. At any rate...

...in the spirit of fools rushing in where wiser souls would fear to tread, I asked Pelikan about his conversion. I don’t remember his full response: but the part that did jump out at me was this. He said: “when you study, as I have studied, the history of the Church, and you begin to see—over the past five hundred years— Protestants using against Catholics the very same arguments Catholics used against Protestants at the time of the Reformation, and then you see Catholics returning the favour by using against Protestants the arguments the founders of the Reformation had once used against Catholics, it leaves you no choice but to wonder what the whole thing was all about.”

I must confess...I must acknowledge...that the ongoing debate around the second of the *solas*—*sola fide*, by faith alone—is one of the places in which I sense the

validity of the concern Professor Pelikan was articulating. Recall first that the whole idea of *sola fide*, by faith alone, is in many ways inextricably linked with the first of the *solas*: *sola gratia*, by grace alone. To speak of *sola gratia* is to insist that salvation is of God; it is God's love and God's power that saves us. That leaves open, however, the question with which Martin Luther was so earnestly wrestling during his days in a monastery, namely: how does one access that grace, how does one respond to the offer of God's grace? And Luther came to the conclusion that all of the pietistic practices—the works of righteousness—that he was trying to undertake in order to draw him closer to God, were actually operating in the precisely opposite way. The more Luther attempted to do things that would be pleasing to God, the more inadequate he came to feel and the more aware he became of the gap between himself and the distant God. As explained last Sunday: it was through his reading of scripture, especially a handful of the Psalms along with the Apostle Paul—particularly Romans and Galatians—that Luther came to recognize the righteousness-imputing act of God in Christ. In other words: there was no need for human beings to prove themselves righteous; God in Christ declared those righteous all who...

...ah...here's the catch...

...God in Christ declared righteous, all who came to God through faith...through trust...in the grace that had been shown to them in Jesus Christ. That was Luther's great spiritual and theological breakthrough. But if you ponder that breakthrough for even an instant, you begin to see some of the stress-points it houses.

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Let's begin with "works": the works of piety which, far from bringing Luther closer to God, only served to alienate him from God. Defined in that way, Luther—I believe—was quite correct to raise alarm bells. What Luther clearly recognized, was the danger we walk our way into, when we use our pietistic practices in order to score brownie points with God. To the extent that I am setting out to use **any** practice—no matter how pious and righteous—in order to win God's favour, I am engaged in the sort of presumption that will not end well: a spiritual dead-end, so to speak. And yet!

Does that mean all works are a snare...a problem...a mistake. Does it mean that any expectation that our faith—our trust in God—might lead us to the doing of something by way of response: does it mean that sort of expectation is problematic? Try telling that to the author of the New Testament book of James: a book that Luther would have been happy to remove from the New Testament! In particular, ponder the implications of these words from that essential New Testament text:

What good is it, my sisters and brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good^[b] is that? So also faith by

itself, if it does not have works, is dead... Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

And surely that passage from James is a pretty clear indication that at least some of the issues with which Martin Luther was wrestling 500 years ago, were also rearing their head in the very different context of the founding of the early Church some 1500 years prior to Luther's time. My own take on the question of "works", is that it all depends on how you define a "work". If a "work" is defined as a practice of piety that aims to please God, you've got a problem: I stand with Martin Luther on that point. But surely if a "work" is defined as an act of love in which you or I reach out to a neighbor in order to extend to them the same love that has been extended to us in Christ: well, who is going to argue with that? As a matter of fact: anyone who spends any time whatsoever in this United Church of ours will know full well that we show very little patience with those who simply wish to bask in God's grace, without attempting to manifest that grace. What's true for us is true for the vast majority of Protestants: who at times would likely find the lives of some of the great Catholic contemplatives to be grossly irresponsible, critiquing them for spending too much of their energy simply basking in the grace of God, rather than getting their hands dirty and doing something! Suffice it to say... suffice it to say that when we, who are heirs of Luther's Reformation, set out to critique "works", we enter into an area of great complexity.

Much the same, of course—much the same, can be said of the whole question of "faith". As I pointed out last week, one of the great dangers when we speak of these first two *solas*—*sola gratia* (by grace alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone)—is that we invert their importance, an inversion reflected in the fact that we abbreviate Luther's great insight by referring to it as "Justification by Faith". The problem with that, of course, is that it hints at the possibility of putting our "faith" ahead of God's "grace", rather than the other way around, so that—in effect—we can almost seem to be saying that it is our faith in God that triggers God's grace: that minus our faith, God's grace is inoperative. And please: before you dismiss that as an idea no one would ever be so foolish to believe, recall all of those people—Protestant people—who bury a loved one convinced that they will never see that person again, because their deceased had never gotten around (at least to the best of their knowledge) to the making an explicit confession of faith in the saving power of God's grace through Jesus Christ. I have certainly met individuals who have been tormented for decades, because they are certain that their mom or their dad or a brother or a sister or a child are lost for all eternity: and not because that mom or dad or brother or sister or child failed to do the right things, but because they failed to place their trust in Jesus. And I wonder... I wonder: how different that sort of neurosis really and truly is, from the neurosis Martin Luther faced as he sought, within the confines of a monastery, to find a loving God?

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Was Luther then simply wrong? Was Luther's emphasis upon "faith" merely one more false lead, one more problematic detour, in the checkered 2000-year history of the Church?

Louis Boyer, a Protestant theologian who eventually converted to Catholicism (conversions seem to be our theme, this morning!)...Louis Boyer, who despite having become a Catholic, continued to believe that Luther and the other Reformers have much to teach the Church...

...Boyer argues that one of the true breakthroughs Luther authored, involved the way in which Luther's emphasis on personal "faith" leaves us no choice but to recognize the irreplaceable worth and dignity of the individual: each and every individual, each and every person. Not a self-centered "individualism" that turns its back on others, rather the grounded "individualism" that acknowledges the extent to which we are each called to take responsibility for our personal relationship with God, our personal incorporation of God's gifts into our lives, and our inevitably imperfect attempts at putting into practice the love with which we were first loved. For better or for worse—and I think largely for better—the revolution affected by Luther (a revolution that has impacted the Church well beyond Protestantism's boundaries)...that revolution makes it unmistakably clear that there is more to the Christian life than simply counting oneself a part of the Christian "team". Being a Christian is not like rooting for the Canucks; it's not a spectator sport! On the contrary: the way of Martin Luther—which is to say the way of *sola fide*—is a way of making the Gospel personal, a way of making the challenge of living the Gospel personal, a way of making the challenge of trusting in the Gospel personal.. And yes: it goes without saying, there is danger to all of that...none of that comes to us risk-free. On the contrary!

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Those of you...those of you who were here on Friday evening, to hear Steve Bell perform...will likely recall the hauntingly beautiful story he told about his mom. Both of Steve's parents are entering into their final years; both of them faithful Christians...in fact, his dad a prison chaplain for many decades and his mom (in addition to raising a family) serving as the faithful partner of a prison chaplain, a life that cannot have been without its fair share of stresses and strains. At any rate: her health is failing. One day when Steve was sitting with her, she said to him—clearly looking ahead to what will await her when she draws her last breath—she said to him: "I just hope that I have been good enough." And you know...

...what I found so powerful about that little story—especially in light of Luther and his *sola fide*, Luther's "by faith alone"...what I found so powerful was its reminder that it doesn't much matter whether we Christians are weighing our works (have I *done* enough?) or our faith (have I truly *believed* sincerely enough?). Either way, we can do a pretty good job of tormenting ourselves...and convincing ourselves that we are not on the right side vis a vis our relationship with God. At such times...

Well: at such times two things ought to happen. First, at such times, it behooves us to remember Paul's powerful words from Galatians: *For freedom Christ has set us free...*a freedom that surely incorporates freedom from the kind of neurotic anxiety that can sap our vital energy and make it impossible for us to get on with the actual living out

of the Christ life. I don't think God's intention for us—I certainly know that Martin Luther's intention for us—is not for us to drain our energy chasing our tail in order to convince ourselves that we have done enough or that we have believed enough. That way lies madness. The call of faith—the call of grace—aims to set us free so that we can get on with the real work of the Gospel, which is not the work of worrying about our salvation, but rather the work of loving others as lavishly as Christ loved us. That's one lesson I draw from all of this. The other lesson?

Well. As I bring these reflections to a close, I invite you to have a glance at the central portion of an altarpiece, the original of which is now housed in a French museum.ⁱⁱ Worth noting that the altarpiece is roughly the same age as the Reformation; it turned 500 years just a year or two ago. Also worth noting? That the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, kept a reproduction of that altarpiece before him in his study. Why? Above all, because of the remarkable figure of John the Baptist just to the right of the crucified Christ, pointing toward the Cross, pointing to the Christ. And Barth believed that was his job as a theologian: to point others to Christ. But now here's the thing.

At its best, the Church as a whole—Protestants of every stripe and conviction (mainliners, Evangelicals, Charismatics, Fundamentalists) as well as Catholics and Orthodox—at their best, all branches of the Church will readily agree that the answer to all of our neurotic anxiety involves turning away from the mirror...in which we ponder and worry about and fret-over our own works and our own faith...

...instead turning to gaze on the One who gave His very life, that you and I might have life, and have it in abundance. That you and I might truly be free: free from fear and free to love. Then again...then again...

...all of that leads directly to a third of the *solas*: *solus Christus*, by Christ alone. In order to grapple with that third Reformation principle, however...you'll have to return next Sunday.

Amen!

ⁱ <https://philosophicaugustine.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/jaroslav-pelikan.jpg>

ⁱⁱ http://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/dhp2113/files/2014/12/Mathis_Gothart_Gru%CC%88newald_019.jpg