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

There’s this story about Martin Luther that is both rather touching and revealing. In 1521, after Luther had been put under the imperial ban (meaning he could be killed on sight), he went into hiding. While he was away, his young friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon took over leadership of the reformation movement in Wittenberg. The problem was, though, that Melanchthon was of a totally different personality than Luther. Luther was bold and brash, colorful and charismatic, full of a peasant’s earthy vocabulary, confident and sure. Melanchthon, on the other hand, was quiet and unassuming, conciliatory and accommodating, a brilliant scholar and academic but certainly not the dashing figure Luther was. Luther was thunder and lightning; Melanchthon was a gentle rain-shower.

Anyway, while Luther was holed up at the Wartburg Castle (disguised as a German knight, and hiding from the emperor and his men), Melanchthon was forced to become the theological leader of the Protestants. But soon enough Melanchthon realized he was in over his head. He did not know what to do. Melanchthon was an excellent lieutenant, but a poor general. Fear paralyzed him and things started to fall apart. Constantly afraid that he would do something wrong — even sinful — he eventually wrote to Luther, begging for advice and guidance. And Luther’s response? In a letter, after giving Melanchthon words of wisdom on several of the problems he had laid before Luther, Luther ends with these words:

*If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true — not an imaginary — sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins*
be strong — but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter, are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God’s glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard, for you are quite a sinner.

A *touching* story, I said. Because Luther knew and loved his young friend. He knew the agonies of the soul that Melanchthon was going through in trying to do God’s will. And so, rather than just tell him what to do, Luther wanted to point Melanchthon to the only true source of peace and confidence: Christ Jesus. In effect, Luther’s words tell him to use his sanctified common sense — along with guidance from the Word of God, of course — in making his decisions. And then, once those decisions have been made, to rest easy. For if they were in accordance with God’s will, then all would be fine. And if not? If Melanchthon did what he thought was right, only to learn later that it was not? Well, there is forgiveness in Christ. And in THAT, all is also good.

A *revealing* story, I said. Because it shows us that Luther understood both the human condition AND God’s grace. We do the best we can, but the fact of the matter is that we WILL sin. It is a guaranteed, sure thing. You know that too. Not a day goes by that we do not sin. Not because we WANT to, but because we are weak and foolish and saddled with a fallen nature. But the Good News is that we have a forgiving God. A God who loves us so much that He came down from heaven to be our Savior. To keep the commandments perfectly. To pay for our sin on the cross. To rise on Easter to open heaven to us. And all this — not because we deserve it or earn it — but simply because He is good and merciful and gracious. Even to poor, miserable sinners. Like Melanchthon. And Luther. And us.

(pause)
Unfortunately, though, some people have taken Luther’s words in that letter and they have focused on the WRONG part. In fact, they even make Luther say the very opposite of what he was telling Melanchthon. Remember where Luther said “Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger”? Well, they take that out of context and try to make Luther say we should just go ahead and sin, and then ask for forgiveness later. Now, that is most certainly NOT what Luther was saying! Not in the least! Luther was not excusing sin, let alone condoning or advocating it. Rather, he was telling a worried, fearful Christian tormented by Satan’s whispers and accusations to rest in the Gospel and not in his own works or deeds.

So, what does all this have to do with our text today? With St. Paul’s words to the Roman Christians read earlier? Well, Paul was dealing with the same attitude as those who have misunderstood Luther’s so-called “sin boldly” comment. You see, there really is nothing new under the sun (as Solomon wrote). Human nature is sinful, in all times and throughout history. That is so in our day. It was so in Luther’s time. And it was the case in the era of the apostles. People will try to use the Gospel as an excuse or license to sin. But that is to misunderstand and twist the Gospel into a pretzel, and make it something altogether different.

In the beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul proves that we are saved by grace and not works. That we can never, ever earn God’s approval by our works. No matter how hard we try. That is the way of the Law. And it can only condemn, because we fail. Oh, the Law is good — it IS from God, after all. And it is given us for our blessing — and so it keeps some sense of order in this fallen world; it makes us aware of our sin; it provides a guide to a God-pleasing life for a believer. But the Law itself cannot bring us to heaven. Only the Gospel — the Good News of Christ for us, in life and death — only the Gospel can do that.
And in the first five chapters of his letter, Paul shows that with all sorts of examples. It is not obedience to the Law that saves, but only Christ for us. The problem is that some were then saying that, if we are saved by faith and not works, then it does not matter WHAT we do. If God forgives sin freely, for Jesus’ sake, then why NOT just satisfy your sinful urges and lusts? Why NOT ignore the Law and commandments — even flaunt them? They said that as long as we later seek forgiveness, God will be OK with it. In short, they were taking Paul’s message and making it into a “sin boldly” kind of excuse to break the Law.

And Paul’s answer? He says: “Are we to sin because we are not under Law but under grace? By no means!” By no means! You see, a Christian does not WANT to sin. No, a Christian wants to do what pleases God. Not in order to WIN God’s approval and favor, but rather because he already has that favor, that grace, in Christ. And that changes how we live. Not as “slaves to sin” — as we were under the Law — meaning that even when we tried, we failed. But now as “slaves of Righteousness”.

Now, whatever does THAT mean? Well, if you look at Paul’s words as found in your worship folder, you will see that “righteousness” there is spelled with a small “R”. But I think it is better to capitalize that “R”, meaning Christ as our Righteousness (which is exactly what St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians). That is, we are “slaves” of Christ! We do what HE wills, not as we will.

Slaves of Christ. Slaves. Think about that. Right now we are hearing an awful lot about the legacy of slavery in our nation, some even using it to justify rioting and looting and violence against people who never owned slaves. Slavery is bad, right? Well, look at what St. Paul writes here. He says we are either slaves to sin OR slaves of Righteousness. But in either case, we are slaves. His point is that we are either controlled by God or the devil. We are either owned by one or the other. We are NOT free, in either case.
And as long as one is “under the Law” — that is, as long as a person lives his life trying to win his own way into heaven — he is a slave of the devil. Because that is what the devil wants us to think, and how he wants us to live. You see the devil is fine with God’s Law — if he can get us to believe THAT is how we are made right with the Lord. By our works. By our obedience. By our goodness. So, Satan will tempt us even with the Law (and remember, it is God’s Law, after all) — so long as we fall for the devil’s lie that we CAN keep those commandments enough to earn salvation.

Or the devil is thrilled when we, like Melanchthon, get all caught up in wondering and worrying about whether or not we have done everything right. Did I miss some little thing? Did I forget some little ritual or rite? Did I think or say or do something that will make God angry with me? Well, of course you have! That’s Luther’s point to his friend: you ARE a sinner. And you WILL sin, over and over and over again, every day of your life. You will sin by what you think, and say, and do. By what you do, and by what you fail to do. By what you knew was wrong, and by things you did not know were against God’s will. And the sooner we realize that, the better.

But, Luther says, don’t stop there. Don’t get hung up on your sin. You ARE quite a sinner, it is true. But Jesus is an even GREATER Savior. He is God, after all. And He has fulfilled the commandments — and gives YOU the credit. He has picked up all sin — which includes yours — and He has paid the price at the cross. He has burst from the tomb, to prove it IS all finished and given to you as a free gift of His love. And since He is God, that is MORE than enough.

Don’t look to yourself — either to your “goodness” OR to your sins — look to Christ. Trust in Him. His works in life and death. For you. THERE is your hope. There is your salvation. Find your peace there. And stop your worrying and fretting and fussing. (pause)

But, then, live. Listen again to how St. Paul puts it in our text:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather
offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Live as one who is owned/controlled/possessed by the Lord. Understand that what you say and do reflects and shows Him. Realize that He lives and speaks and acts through you. Appreciate the sheer joy of being His instrument in this world, to share His love within all the parts of your life. At work. At home. In the neighborhood. At the grocery store. Wherever you are.

The problem is that, like Melanchton, we often wonder HOW to do that. Well, there is no magic blueprint, no secret treasure map, no step-by-step guide to a foolproof Christian life. You do the best you can, following the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. You pray. You seek guidance and advice from fellow-believers. You think and meditate and wait. And then you DO.

And if you later determine that maybe you did NOT make the best choice, then you throw yourself onto the mercies of our Lord Jesus, understanding (as Luther said) that NO sin is greater than His love or sacrifice. And then you pick yourself up, and you get right back in there. To “offer yourself...as an instrument of Righteousness” — that is, as a slave of Christ. Sharing the love and forgiveness you have received. As Luther said: “Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong — but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.” Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus. Amen.

We stand and confess together our faith, using the Nicene Creed as found in your folder.....