

***19For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. 24Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 27and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. 28And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.***

The other night I was washing a vase. As simple things can sometimes do, suddenly I was years ago and a thousand miles away.

I saw the blue vase. Glass locked within glass, the sky swirling within a transparent cover - clear as crystal - deep as a northern lake. Many the time I picked it up, saw the price on the bottom - put it down once more - then glanced at it from afar.

I remember the day my father was with me in that store. How he saw the vase, asked if would I like to have it.

“No,” I said, “It’s too much to spend.” And with my words I stole joy from my father that day. He wanted to give. I was too proud to receive - too proud to take something for nothing - a gift of love.

How strange then, when my father’s next birthday rolled around, I went to that same store. I had seen there a bronze cast dog, a pointer - just like the dog that sent the pheasants flying during my father’s favorite harvest. This was the perfect gift for my dad.

It was expensive, far more than I would ever spend on myself. But I did not hesitate. I wanted him to be so happy with what I had given.

I sent the gift to him, from North Dakota where I was, back to Milan Ohio where he lived.

He sent a letter saying thanks.

Some months later Sue and I and the kids set out for Ohio on vacation. As soon as we entered the house my eye searched out my gift. There on the mantle stood the dog, its tail broken off.

I think of the vase never received as I hear God's word this morning: Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The second year confirmation class calls these "pastor words" - justified, redemption - words that no one out there in the real world ever uses. The students always make me explain.

Maybe this is like God saying, "I'll be there for you no matter what. I'll never see your flaws, even if the gifts you give me are broken, I'll always see them as whole."

Or maybe it is like God saying: "Let me give you the most expensive gift ever given - Jesus. Let him be your clothing, your pride, your accomplishment, even your love for me. Let Jesus be everything to you. That will be my joy."

Or maybe it is like this: within our human hearts we need to feel deserving. Justified. When I didn't feel I'd earned the expensive vase from my father, when I did not feel the gift was justified, I refused it. In Jesus God invites us to let go of this need to win our own deserving, and to take as a gift Jesus redemption, his paying our price.

Only one thing God needs from you: that you trust everything God gives you in Jesus, that you trust Jesus. God is for you, forever and ever. Amen.

"Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."