

Justification

#1 of Sermon Series

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Romans 4:13-25, Mt. 9:9-13, 18-16

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Between now and the end of July when I go on vacation, I have six sermons. (You'll have a respite on June 22 when I'll be away for my son's wedding and Harrison will preach). I want to take these opportunities to lay out my own best understandings of key aspects of Christian faith – places where I have struggled and doubted and stretched and grown into the faith that sustains me. I want to affirm what I believe as clearly as I can – not as Christian truth for all, but as one woman's take after thinking about this stuff all my life and wrestling with it as a preacher since 1982.

Today I'll be talking about Justification by Grace through Faith. This is the bedrock of Christianity, the core of the Luther's Reformation theology, and it comes straight from what the Bible has to say about the way Jesus acted and the way St. Paul wrote. Today's readings are great examples.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus reaches out to 3 different folks in need. He accepts the taxpayer; he heals a woman, and he brings a religious leader's daughter back to life. None of these actions were based on merit; they were free. They were gifts to a person who was considered a sinner, a poor person who had no health care, and a rich person whose money was of no use to save his daughter. Even faith was not an explicit condition for Jesus' actions, although he does mention it in the case of the woman. All three people were justified by grace; they were accepted by Jesus as beloved by God.

In St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, he begins his great treatise on Justification by Grace, going all the way back to God's huge promise to Abram of love and fruitfulness for him and all his descendants forever. The promise was not based on one single thing Abram did to earn it – it was just a free gift. God reckoned Abram as righteous, not because Abram deserved it, but because God accepted and blessed him unconditionally. And faith was Abram's response to what God did, not the cause of it.

So, for us – how do we understand Justification by Grace through Faith? In my younger years these words seemed a meaningless slogan, and it took quite awhile for me to understand them as Christian language addressing a fundamental condition we all share, whether we're religious or not. And that condition is our need to feel right about ourselves, and, if we believe in God, right with God. The way I was brought up, and what I heard in the churches of my childhood, and what is still taught in many churches, and what is a hallmark of our American secular faith is that we get to be right with ourselves, with others and with God by earning it. By doing the right thing, measuring up, deserving – this is life as a meritocracy, life as an assignment.

For me, as a girl, that meant striving to achieve, to get the best grades, to be good, to look and dress right and act in ways to gain my parents' and teachers' approval and popularity with friends. I didn't use the word Justification, didn't even know it, but what I wanted was basic justification – to feel right about myself. I needed the sense that I was of value, that I was worthy of love. Deep down, I knew I had my parents' love, that I was fine in their eyes – but they were leery of expressing this except for praising achievements.

This aching for acceptance is deep and human, and along with it comes fear, fear of rejection. So often, our strivings to justify ourselves, based on our own efforts, grow out of this fear, and it can be a powerful motivator. In some areas of life, it's a good one. Fear of flunking out or getting fired does impel us to try harder, to do our best. But, existentially, self-justification is a bust! We can't get there. In religious terms, we can't save ourselves from the wounds of existence.

This does not mean that we need God, as some believe, because we are hopelessly sinful, or that religion is a crutch for our weakness. I do not believe that we are impossibly alienated from God, and for me, religion based on trying to appease a wrathful God is bad religion. Guilt caused by such religion is probably more prevalent than the real guilt we should feel when we have caused needless hurt. I know – people come to me – feeling too guilty to come to communion, feeling guilty because they've left Roman Catholicism, feeling unworthy of God's love even though they are struggling to live good lives. They fear it's up to them, and that what they do is never enough. They feel they need to get it right, and they can't, we can't.

All of this kind of reliance on self-justification and guilty fear of God is a misunderstanding of Christianity and of Judaism as well. It took me at least a two-step process to even begin to get it – about justification by grace through faith. It was only through my own experience that those words began to mean something.

The first step was when all my attempts, some of them very confused, to be a perfect wife in my first early marriage, were met with massive betrayal. I remember being literally down on my knees alone in our small apartment in Arlington, sobbing as the realization sank in that I could not earn and keep the love of another human being by my own efforts. I couldn't depend on someone else to make me feel OK about myself if I just acted right. It was the first time in my young life when something really big, something I desperately wanted, was beyond the reach of my own determination and will power to achieve.

The second step was more of a process. It began when I walked into St. John's Episcopal Church in Fort Washington Maryland in the spring of 1975. There I heard Christianity preached in a way that either I hadn't or couldn't hear before. It was as if Christianity was a whole new language, but one that now spoke to my deepest human concerns about being worthy and being loved. Slowly, Sunday after Sunday, through

weeks of an adult Inquirers' Class, talks with the Rector, I began to understand about Justification by Grace, through Faith. I began to get what Paul Tillich affirmed in his most famous sermon "You Are Accepted". He says that acceptance is pure grace, in words that have been quoted from thousands of pulpits since: "Grace strikes when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life...It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much...*Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*' If that happens to us, we experience grace".

My understanding of this grace and my real faith in this grace didn't come from some dramatic conversion experience, but this understanding and faith has come. I do believe with all my heart in this grace, and that we are ultimately justified by it. For me this was a huge, life-changing possibility, this assurance that we already have God's love, that we don't have to do anything to get it. Believing in this grace, setting our hearts on it is, of course, a matter of faith – there is no proof. We do have the freedom to reject that grace, or act against it, and we do, but we don't have to earn it in the first, or second, or third place. We are accepted, and I believe that the faith to respond to this – to live in this assurance is also a gift – needing from us, only the openness to embrace it.

The immediate red flag in the face of all this talk of grace is this: Well, then why would anyone be good, especially in a sacrificial way, if God loves us no matter what? What happens to morality, and rules, and laws?

The Biblical understanding about law, or Torah, is that it is a gift from God, an inspired code of behavior based on love of God and love of neighbor that helped their community thrive and maintain their identity. Law was a means to provide for health and justice, not the means of salvation, not an end in itself. And so for us – laws and morality are good for us, and we need them, but they don't save us. They are a response to a gracious God, a response to the gift of life. We are called to behave well, to be good, not in order to get God's love, but because we already have it. We are accepted!

Let me illustrate what I mean about behaving well as response, not as a means to earn favor. Here is a Tale of Two Teachers: In 4th grade, my gym teacher was Miss McGee, and I hated and feared her. She was like a drill sergeant, with a cold, angry face, leathery skin, ropey muscles. She spit when she talked. I didn't think I was much of an athlete anyway, but with her, I felt I could never measure up, and I dreaded gym. I tried hard, but I would forget my uniform, be late, be out of step in one of our precision

exercises – all of it was a nightmare. I was trying to behave well in order to gain acceptance and in fear of rebuke and punishment.

In 7th grade, I had an art teacher, Mrs. Quirk, and I knew from the beginning that she liked me and wanted me to succeed. Just as with gym, I didn't think I was much of an artist, but I loved her class because she constantly encouraged me and pointed out good things in my paintings – opening up a new creative world for me. I tried really, really hard, not in order to gain her approval, but because I already had it and wanted to respond by doing my best work. To this day, a painting from that year hangs in my mother's apartment.

We have it backwards if we think faith is what brings God into our lives and gets God to answer prayers and reveal God-self and love us. God does all that. God's love is in our world and in our lives. This is the grace that justifies us, and faith is our response. Faith is saying "yes" to grace because we've experienced it, and we are encouraged by others throughout history who have attested to this grace.

I believe that this grace which accepts us utterly has always been real. The story of God taking flesh in Jesus revealed this in a new and unique way. If God is willing to live in us and in the lives we live, bear the crosses we bear, suffer and die with us as God did with Jesus – then we're good enough. We're accepted and, to use St. Paul's language, reckoned as righteous. It is this incredible grace, reaching towards us, and our faith in response, that can change and free us. It is by this grace that I do believe God can transform each of us and our whole hurting world – may our hearts be open to receive this grace and live in grateful response. Amen.