



First United Church of Oak Park

Justified by Grace Through Faith

Romans 3:19-28

Alicia Reese

October 30, 2022

Today is Reformation Sunday. It was over 500 years ago that Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This act was the culmination of a lifelong journey of discernment and wrestling by Luther about where he stood in relationship with God. He “hated the idea of a righteous God who punishes sinners.” He believed in a God that is righteous and merciful, just and loving, not just and punitive. This theodicy of God conflicted with what the Roman Catholic Church was teaching. And he knew that even he--a man who had dedicated his life to the church as a monk, studying, preaching, and teaching the Bible and theology, doing good works, who by all standards was a good person who lived a devout life--still, even he was not justified or worthy of the saving love of God. Coming to this realization for himself was crushing, but the implications for humanity were damning.

Finally, Luther had a breakthrough after wrestling with Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, which our Scripture today comes from. Paul’s words and theology are the foundation of Luther’s Doctrine of Justification, which he called “the centerpiece of our teaching,” and which John Calvin would later call “the main hinge on which religion turns.” This doctrine was the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation, the beginnings of our split from the Roman Catholic Church.

In this passage, Luther was affirmed in his belief and understanding of God’s nature as gracious and righteous, merciful and loving in such a way that filled him with joy, hope, and a sense of freedom, not just for him, but for all humanity.

This doctrine is foundational to Protestantism and Reformed theology, which means this is where our branch of the Christian family tree extends from. Both our denominations, the PCUSA and the UCC, are Protestant denominations and prescribe to Reformed theology.

In order to better understand this theological doctrine, and in the hope of being better able to communicate it today, I spent a lot of time this week reading the words of theologians Shirley Guthrie and Daniel Migliore.

But before we dive in, consider these questions for yourself...

- How often have you tried to prove yourself to friends, co-workers, family, even yourself? Working so hard to convince yourself and others that you deserve their respect, their attention, their approval?

- How often have you pushed yourself to the limits, going above and beyond, exhausting yourself in the hope of showing and proving you are a good person, that you are enough, only to find that what you've done and by extension who you are will never be enough?
- How often have you questioned whether or not you are worthy? Worthy of love, or acceptance, or forgiveness?

I ask you these questions, because they are ones I myself have wrestled with either in personal relationships, my relationship with God, in my academic and professional careers, and even with strangers. These are tough and painful things to struggle with. And the reality is, all of us, in some way or another, spend our lives trying to justify ourselves, our existence, who we are, what we do. But no matter how hard we try, it's never enough. We find that we are unable to buy, convince, or coerce the respect, love, and acceptance of others. Similarly, we cannot buy, convince, or coerce the love, mercy, or forgiveness of God. But that is the beauty of the nature of God and of the Doctrine of Justification: we don't have to.

The Doctrine of Justification tells us that we are justified by grace through faith. Justification, grace, faith: all of these ideas can be difficult to understand on their own. Combined, they create a big theological undertaking, so let's break it down. Starting with what justifies us: grace. That is, God's grace.

God's grace is freely given to us; it is God telling you, "I love you, I accept you just as you are. I justify you, I deem you worthy, I call you righteous, despite your open and secret sins, despite your unworthiness and unloveableness, despite what you do or don't do and your inability and unwillingness to love others and let them love you." Justification by grace is a BIG "nevertheless." Nevertheless, God loves you, unconditionally, meaning that God doesn't demand punishment, nor that you punish yourself.

In a court of law, this would not be seen or understood as justice, but thankfully our God is not a judge in a court of law. However, this is the analogy Paul uses in his letter, which is why it can be confusing. All of this language about "the Law" that Paul uses is in reference to the Jewish laws prescribed in the Bible. Since Paul is writing to the early church, of which there were Jew and Gentile members, he is working to reconcile these peoples to one another and to God. But that language doesn't fully translate for us in our current context.

If we were to re-word this analogy to makes sense of it, God is the righteous, or just, judge of the court and we, humanity, stand accused and convicted of unrighteousness. Rather than a sentence of punishment, we are given the sentence of justification. We are set free. God, as judge, declares us to be just or righteous, pretends we are not guilty, and falsely declares us to be morally perfect and thus deserving of salvation. We are acquitted. It is an act of grace, granting us freedom without requiring anything from us. Gifting us sinners the opportunity for a new kind of life.

This gift, this acquittal in court, already happened, through the life, death on the cross, and resurrection of Christ. This grace granted to us, and the love God has for us, is not a reward for anything we have done or confessed we haven't done. It happened long before we were born and it was God's gift to humanity, given absolutely freely, with no strings attached. And the result? We are justified. Meaning, things between us and God are made right.

So, it is God's love and grace that justify us. When we can accept that God loves us just as we are, then we are free from the fear that causes us to try and prove, convince, or manipulate God or anyone else to believe we are loveable or worthy. We can experience transformation as a result of the power of God's love, a transformation that punishments or threats would never be able to accomplish. This seemingly unjust, but radical, unconditional love has the power to conquer our fear of inadequacy and unworthiness and lead us to reconciliation with God, with our fellow human beings, and even with ourselves.

So although we cannot justify ourselves, thankfully, God can, does, and already has. Without qualifications or prerequisites.

This was the big point of tension for Luther and the other reformers with the Catholic Church. The reformers felt that the Catholic Church had set prerequisites in order for human beings to attain the justifying grace of God; that in order to be justified, and achieve a new life in Christ, you had to be a good person, do good things, live a devout life. But one, that would mean that by our deeds or actions we have the power to change God, which we don't; and two, it begs the question, what about people who do all of these good things for the wrong reasons? Instead, the reformers believed that new life and good works are the fruits of God's act of justification, not a prerequisite. Fruits received by God's grace through faith.

This moves us to the final piece of justification by grace through faith. The "through faith" piece.

According to our Scripture today and a tenet of Protestantism, neither our good works nor our faith justifies us. God alone does this with freely given grace in Christ. So, what does faith have to do with all of this? If we are already loved and justified, by God's free grace, doesn't that mean what we do doesn't really matter?

No! Because, although our faith does not determine if God loves us, faith is the very necessary means by which we accept and live *from* God's love.

Simply put, faith is trust, and Robert McAfee Brown put it this way: "the Gospel does not say, 'trust God and God will love you.' The Gospel says, 'God already loves you, so trust God.' Faith is not something we do that saves us; it is our acknowledgement that we are saved." It is how we receive, enjoy, and reciprocate the love God had for us, long before we ever thought of loving God.

Faith is not intellectual understanding or acceptance of theological doctrines. Faith is not believing in the Bible or what some theologian wrote centuries or decades ago; it

isn't even listening to what a preacher has to say on a Sunday morning. It is confidence in God, it is coming to know and believe in God; which a book or theologian or preacher may point to, but that's all anything of this earthly realm can do: point to God. Faith must do the rest.

But that doesn't mean we are completely helpless in matters of faith. We can put ourselves in situations, like church, that afford us opportunities to hear about and experience God's love over and over again. Which is what we need most anyway! We need to hear time and time again the remarkably good news that God loves, forgives and accepts us despite everything we have been and done or not been and done. But just as actions speak louder than words, it isn't enough just to hear this good news; we need to experience God's love. We need visible demonstrations like witnessing and participating in baptisms, partaking in communion: reminders and assurances that God knows each of us by name, has adopted us as God's beloved children, and deems us worthy again and again.

This is why we are called into communities of faith, into the body of Christ, the church. The church must be the place where people can risk putting aside all their defenses and masks, and their attempts to prove or convince, the place where they can know they will be accepted just as they are, where forgiven sinners are ready to welcome and forgive other sinners.

Because this doctrine, justification by grace through faith, is not just about you or me being justified and reconciled with God, it is about all people, as Paul's letter shows. He is concerned with the salvation of the world; he speaks of Jews AND Gentiles being reconciled to God and to each other, of all people being justified by God's love and grace.

At its core, the Doctrine of Justification is a doctrine of justice. It contains the power and ability to bring true equality and equity to fruition, and by extension, peace. Because God's justifying grace means those who are poor, oppressed, or marginalized are afforded and worthy of the same help, rights, and benefits as the rich and privileged. It flips the table on our unjust social systems, saying that all human beings belong in a just and humane society. God calls us, all of humanity, worthy of this new life, this just world.

This is the purpose of the church: to tell one another again and again the good news of God's love, to remind people they are worthy, valued, and loved, just as they are. To create opportunities, again and again, for people to experience the true nature of God.

May this Reformation Sunday be the reminder you need, that you have been given God's gift of grace. You are justified. Breathe it in, feel it deep in your bones, in your heart, in your soul. You are worthy, you are loved, you belong, just as you are. God says so. God calls you righteous, deserving, beloved.

Whatever doubt or objection just came into your mind, silence it. The goodness and grace of God speaks truth louder and more completely than that voice ever could. So trust God and the nature of God. Believe it. Know it.

This is the truth that has transformed me and my relationship with God. This is the life of faith I live out of, never perfectly, for me or anyone else, but the truth and acknowledgement of God's love is freeing and keeps me continually in relationship with God. My hope is that in all that I do, in all the ways I am in relationship, I point to God by talking about and practicing the unjust, but radical love God has for us.

I pray that now you, too, will experience the joy and hope, that Martin Luther realized in Paul's words and understanding of God, through the Doctrine of Justification by Grace through Faith. And I wonder, how will it inspire you to live out your faith?

Amen