

“Justified”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Romans 5:1-5

Winston Churchill once quipped, “History will be kind to me, because I intend to write it,” and so he did, in a magnificent six-volume work on the Second World War. Well-written, superbly documented, and incredibly insightful, the main lesson of this magisterial series is how much better the war would have gone if Churchill had gotten his way more often. It was the capstone of a life-long career of publishing, and Sir Winston shortly thereafter won the Noble Prize for Literature.

On a much less grand scale, I indulge in similar behavior when it comes to sweets. You see, Stephanie likes to bake. It’s a great stress-reliever for her, and she’s really good at it, and since she works so hard at baking those cookies and brownies and pies and cakes, it would be ungrateful and dishonorable of me not to consume them. What a noble man I am.

That process of thought, used by all people both great and humble, like Churchill and me, is called self-justification. The process involves convincing ourselves, in hopes of convincing others if need be, that what we have done or plan to do was or will be the right thing. And as silly and deceptive as it may seem, it is a strongly engrained habit, because it is an unavoidable necessity of life in our world.

Consider the newest crop of rising college freshmen. Each of them had to fill out applications, write essays, and endure grueling interviews and auditions, to pursue their dream of receiving a college education. The entire gauntlet demands that the candidate flog their wares – their grades, their test scores, their extracurricular activities and community service – as superior, more worthy, than their competitors. It is an arduous process of self-justification, of proving that

they belong more than another person does. This example is required by a system that offers no alternative and is, therefore, truly necessary in a way that Churchill's take on history or my excuse for eating sweets are not.

Applying for job isn't much different. People spruce up their resumes, making sure to put the best foot forward, because first impressions count. People practice answers to that annoying interview question, "Tell me about a time when you failed," concocting a situation sufficiently severe to reflect their leadership qualities, without revealing the worst disasters that everyone endures. It's all a process of self-justification, because if you can't sell it to yourself, good luck getting anybody else to buy it.

So self-justification is inevitable and frequently necessary because of the world we live in, but often it's abused as our minds deploy a peculiar logic to make actions seem OK that deep down, in the seat of wisdom, we know are not. This process can even invade our relationship with God. We strive to do what God desires, or what we think God desires, expecting that if we play by the rules and do our part, God will like us and reward us. Only problem is it doesn't work that way.

Every person on the planet is a serial sinner. From the moment we were born to our last dying day, we do things that mess up our relationship with God, and more often than not, we don't even notice. We take our God-given free will and make choices that offend and hurt God, harm others and ourselves, and as much as we repent and beg forgiveness, the truth is that there is nothing anyone can do on their own initiative to get right with God.

It takes grace, that wonderful mysterious gift of God, to somehow reconcile us to the source of all life and goodness, and we are granted access to that grace through faith in Jesus and, more importantly, through the faith of Jesus. As Paul wrote, "Therefore, since we are

justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” To put it simply, our faith connection with Jesus – a faith that transcends mere belief and involves the total commitment of our whole self – that faith connection opens us to receive the gift of grace that makes us OK with God.

And that comes as a tremendous relief, knowing that it’s not up to us to set things right between us and God. Rather God initiated a way for us to be seen as worthy, despite our sins, and that way is Jesus. There are many theories as to how this works precisely, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss those with you, but this isn’t the time. How it works is much less important than the fact that it does work, and how do we know that? Our experience of faith and the witness of scripture reveal this truth. The wisdom that lurks deep within us resonates when we encounter this exceptionally merciful act: that God by sending a Son would make us acceptable.

This fact of faith affects our daily lives. Imagine not having to concoct elaborate and logically suspect ideas about your worth as a person. When we are justified through faith in Jesus and through the faith of Jesus, self-justification becomes obsolete. What’s the point of it anymore? Think of how much time and energy that saves. We can look at who we are honestly, unhappy perhaps with certain weaknesses and flaws, but confident that the only One who really matters says, “You’re OK, because I decided it is so, because your faith relationship with Jesus allows my healing, strengthening grace to flow into you, change you for the better, and make you fully alive.”

Of course, that’s doesn’t mean that we live an easy life. Paul writes of suffering, but rather than complaining about it, Paul oddly rejoices in suffering. In fact, he seems almost

enthusiastic about how “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Being justified by faith shifts our perspective significantly. The suffering that once produced despair now relents to the possibility brought by hope, because we can see the suffering of life within a broader context, one in which no matter what happens to us, the basic relationship that gives life and meaning, the faith that empowers us to grow even through pain, stays intact through our connection with Jesus.

We can suffer with a measure of grace, because we abide in the peace of God. It may not reduce physical or emotional agony, the sense of rejection when the college admissions board or the prospective employer says, “Thanks, but no thanks,” but instead of that suffering taking control of our lives, we find release in the free gift of God’s acceptance that enables us to move forward.

Now there will be times when the suffering is so intense, we cannot begin to imagine endurance. There will be times when our endurance is so greatly tested that we feel our character about to break. There will be times when our character is so terribly challenged that not a glimmer of hope seems visible. And in those moments, we may be tempted to think that our faith has proven insufficient, and we have let God down and lost that reconciled relationship. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Indeed, even when suffering wears us down and our endurance is exhausted and our character feels compromised, God is at work within us, in ways we may not immediately perceive, but which are real nonetheless. Often it is only after we have endured that we can see

how God was with us the whole way, sharing in our suffering, just as Jesus suffered on a cross for our sake.

Right now, you might be at a moment in your life when your suffering has gone on for so long you cannot imagine the end of it. The idea of endurance seems insanely hopeful. Remember that God is at work within you, and will never stop working, because God has decided that you are justified. You are OK. Abide in the peace that whatever happens, the most important thing in your life has already happened. You are justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus.

And when your faith in Jesus feels feint, and you wonder where you are with God, just let go and give your life with all its troubles to Jesus, and allow the comforting breath of the Holy Spirit to bring you peace. You need not weave an elaborate web of self-justification, because it is a monumental waste. You need not prove yourself to God, because you can't justify yourself before God. He's already done it.

You know, Churchill labored for years over his history, and it is a valuable contribution to scholarship, despite the narrative's obvious intent to justify the author. I eat sweets, and try to fool myself as to why. Certainly, no college applicant or job seeker should feel a moment's guilt about doing all they can within the bounds of integrity to achieve their goals. But the practice of unnecessary self-justification has to stop, because it betrays an awful insecurity, one that is entirely incompatible with the truth that each person of faith is justified in the sight of God through the grace of Jesus Christ. And the good news is that we can stop, because God has definitively declared, "You are alright with me, just because I say so." Amen.