

Justified Love  
Romans 5:1-8  
June 18, 2017  
Lansdowne UMC

There's a retired United Methodist pastor, Dennis Dorsch, who has been walking with me for nearly a decade as I've been growing spiritually and discerning God's call on my life. For someone who has some significant mobility problems, he remains incredibly active and committed to that Wesleyan spirit of "Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can."

One way he works that out is by being a part of something called "Operation Welcome Home." Several times a week, people from Operation Welcome Home gather at the exit from the international terminal at BWI to welcome American troops returning from a tour of duty overseas. The volunteers prepare goodie bags with snacks, drinks, and other little cards or gifts that are usually made and decorated by local children. Dennis Dorsch, the retired pastor, has taken as his personal mission to bless as many of the returning service men and women as possible. As the troops exit the secure immigration and customs area, they are greeted with the sight of dozens of "Welcome Home" signs, as well as zealous cheers, whistles, and cow bells. As they pass Dennis Dorsch, they are blessed with the sign of the cross. The last time I asked him, which was about a year ago, he said he thought that over the past year or so, he'd welcomed nearly 200,000 troops.

Frequently families will come to meet their returning loved one. On occasion, a father will meet his baby for the first time. And even in these days of video calls, there's no substitute for holding that child in his arms for the first time. Last week, I was told that about a young boy, 7 or 8, that was there to greet his Dad. The second he saw him come through the doors from customs, the boy ran up to his dad and jumped on him. He locked his legs around his waist and his arms around his neck, and he would not let go. The Dad continues down the receiving line, receiving his blessing with his son attached to him. He gets his goodie bag while his son hangs on. He then goes to kiss his wife and greet the rest of his family... the boy still hangs on.

After a way-too-long separation, the boy holds on to his father with everything he's got. He's got all of this love stored up in his heart, and he's gonna do his best to give it all to father as quickly as he can. What a blessing that must have been to the heart of that father.

We're going to be spending the next several weeks focusing on the book of Romans. It seems fitting that on this Father's Day, the passage of Romans that we're focusing on has one of the clearest statements in the New Testament about God the Father's love for humanity. If I were asked for a verse that shows that God loves humanity, I would probably choose John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.") If I were asked for another, I would say, Romans 5:8, from our reading this morning: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

These two verses are saying, essentially, the same thing. God loves you unconditionally. No matter what you say about God, no matter what you do with your life, no matter who you hurt, you are loved.

The Christian faith is not about making God love you. God loves you already. And the way that you know that is because God didn't wait for you to be perfect before Jesus died for you. Paul says a few verses later that "while we were still *enemies*, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." Not only does God the Father love us when we don't love him, but he loves us when we're actively warring against him. And God's love for us isn't a cheap love. It's a deep, costly love that cost the life of Jesus.

God the Father's love for all humanity is unquestionable. But what about humanity's love for God? It should go without saying that humanity fails to give back to God the love that God gives to us. I'm reminded of something C. S. Lewis said. There are only two types of people: those who say to God "thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "thy will be done."

I think that this is a really helpful way to make sense of God's judgment of those he loves unconditionally. What do you do when you have a child who wants nothing to do with you? For sure, you keep on loving them. Never for a second do you stop loving them. But when they're a full-grown adult, can you make them come to family gatherings? No you can't. How could you? They want nothing to do with you. And so you let them do what they want to do, even though it breaks your heart. Even though you know that the more they cut themselves off from you, the worse off they'll be, you let them do what they want. Chaining them to your dining room table is not what you want. You want them to be there because they love you.

I think that this is how God the Father feels toward all his children. Because he honors and respects all of us, he allows us to make our own decision about whether we want to be in a relationship with him or not. On the one hand, we can say “thy will be done.” We can respond to God’s love by loving God back. We can receive his grace, forgiveness and life-giving presence. On the other hand, we can go our own way and hear God say to *us* “thy will be done.” And when we do that, we learn more and more that there is no life apart from God-- there is only deeper and deeper emptiness and death.

This is part of the point that Paul is making in the first 4 chapters of Romans. And because we’re beginning a series on Romans today, I beg you to allow me to summarize what Paul was talking about in those first four chapters. Perhaps the most concise way to say it is that in them, Paul argues from a lot of different angles that neither Jews nor Gentiles in any way deserve God’s love and acceptance, but that Christ and the Spirit demonstrate and make both possible.

In chapter 1, Paul shows how Sin has spread like a cancer to every dimension of human existence-- from the body, to the mind, to the heart. Rather than loving, honoring and worshipping God, humanity looked for its fulfillment elsewhere, giving its worship to things other than the one true God. Then, in chapter two, Paul makes sure that Jews know that they’re not off the hook either, simply because they have the marks of Jewishness and have God’s Instruction to show them the right path. What matters is actions. Jews who have God’s Instruction aren’t off the hook. They have to actually keep the law. On the one hand Gentiles (non-Jews) who *don’t* have the law are in trouble because they’ve turned away from God. And on the other than Jews are in trouble because they haven’t done the law. What matters is doing what is right with the right heart.

People only look at the outward appearances. Does someone look godly? Do they seem like a someone who loves God and who loves their neighbor? “But here’s the thing,” Paul says, “...God looks at the heart.” In particular, in chapter 2:16, Paul says that there will be a day when “God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”

This is the human predicament. Jew or Gentile, law or no law, all are guilty, because no one has fulfilled the law. Humanity’s covenant with God has been broken. Humanity needs a new covenant. And Paul’s good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has brought about the new covenant. Unlike the old covenant, which began with Abraham and had the sign of circumcision, in the new covenant, outward circumcision doesn’t matter. What matters is inward, heart circumcision, which is available to all, whether Jew or Gentile.

This becomes clearer in chapter 3. Chapter 3 verse 9, Paul says, “all, both Jews and Gentiles, are under the power of Sin.” It’s not just that humanity does bad things from time to time. Rather humanity is addicted to Sin, or as Paul will vividly say later, enslaved to Sin. Sin is a power that makes us do what it wants. Of our own will power, we can’t get around its influence on us. (We’ll come back to this when we talk about Romans chapter 7). The evidence of this is that no one is blameless. Everyone does evil. In other words, humanity has two problems. First, there is the problem of sins (plural). Sins committed need forgiveness. But there is also the root of the problem of sins, and that is that humanity is under the power of Sin (singular)-- enslaved to sin. And if that is the case, then we need to be liberated. We need to be redeemed, which means bought back. All God’s law can do is point out where the sin is. Our best attempts to follow it will fall short while we are enslaved to sin. Humanity is in a “no win” situation.

And then in chapter 3 verse 21, come these beautiful words: “But now...” But now God’s solution to this predicament has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Even though humanity has been faithless, God has been faithful to make a way. God’s solution to human faithlessness is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, who put himself forward as an atoning sacrifice. And this solution of God is appropriated to everyone who responds to Jesus with faith and obedience. This is what Paul calls “justification by faith.” It’s not just that sinners are declared righteous while remaining horrible sinners, as if God someone manages to pull some wool over his eyes. Rather, when God speaks, things come into existence that did not exist before. When God says you are righteous, that is what you become. In other words, God’s solution to the human predicament is to transform people, making them a “new creation.” This is the good news.

Alright everyone, wake up. It know. It’s dense. It’s hard to follow. But think about what this means. It means that humanity in general and each of us in particular no longer needs to live under the power of sin. It means in a very very real way, that by the death of Jesus Christ, God the Father sets us free from our addictions. God transforms us, renews us, and empowers us. This is not church mumbo jumbo. This isn’t mental gymnastics. This is the transforming power of God for you and for me. And this is what is available to everyone who puts their trust in Jesus and who makes Jesus the Lord of their life.

I’m gonna skip over a summary of chapter 4, to keep more eyes from glazing over. I also recently talked about it-- go look up the sermon from March 12. But we’re finally ready to hear again the message of Romans 5, which summarizes what’s come before and looks forward to what’s to come. In Romans 5-8, Paul spells out what justification by faith means for the Christian life. In order words, what does it look like

for a Christian to be justified by faith. That's the question that we'll be taking on for the next several weeks.

“Therefore,” Paul says in verse 1. Remember what that means: “stop what you're doing and make sure you understand everything I've already said, because what I'm about to say hinges on it.” “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Those who put their faith in Christ are no longer enemies with God, because God has rescued them and made peace with them. This is God's grace-- the love and power of God that absolutely don't deserve in any way, but which God gives us freely.

God has enabled us to turn around and to run toward our Father in heaven. Justification enables us to stand in God's gracious presence and be at peace. Through Christ, we no longer have to operate out of fear, because God convinces us of the Father's love for us. When Jesus' sacrifice becomes effective for us, God the Father pours his own love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We are no longer enemies, but friends. That's when we can become like that boy at Operation Welcome Home: when we see our Father in heaven, we run to him and jump into his arms and we don't let go. We're just so glad to be in God's presence.

That's really the beginning of the Christian life: a deep love for God-- a love which the Father actually makes possible through the faithfulness of his son by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

So may you seek the justification that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, may you receive God's torrent of love by the Holy Spirit, and may you run toward the arms of your Father in heaven, and hang on with everything you've got.