

Justification
Proper 25C
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14
The Rev. Anne Edge Dale

Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified."

This deeply theological doctrine of justification is why we are here - the belief that we are justified as we stand before God. What does it mean to be justified? How do we understand justification by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord?

Our family spent the summer of 1986 emotionally linked to a ventilator in the NICU of Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters. Attached to that ventilator was our tiny Laura born at 28 weeks weighing in at 1140 grams - ounces were just too massive of a unit of measurement at that point. As she grabbed and held tight to her daddy's index finger with a hand no bigger than my thumb, the little hand would reach only about halfway. As one clergy visitor remarked, "She'd be real cozy in a little shoebox. "

In addition to the ventilator, there were leads to the heart monitor, an oximeter clip and cable, a feeding tube through her nose, a band-aid size blood pressure cuff around her pencil-thin arm, a drain tube inserted in her collapsed lung, and the ever present IV line - all to artificially compensate for the additional 12 weeks she was denied in the womb. Her notecard-size diaper was pinned to the covering of her layette to keep her from sliding down the inclined pitch.

Surrounding her were two-dozen other premies similarly arrayed snoozing under the warming lights of their own layettes.

And, so it was that as I sat beside Laura on one of those very long days, I received word that my grandfather would be coming for a visit. Now, this proposition was the source of some anxiety for me. Even as her mother, I will have to admit, Laura was not a pretty sight. Her mouth and little chipmunk cheeks were covered in a mound of tape to hold the ventilator tube in place and her mass of dark brown hair was shaved back halfway to accommodate IV lines.

More than one among the immediate family members and clergy who were allowed to visit Laura's bedside in the NICU had been pitched into a swirling panic attack in this world of beepers, buzzers, whishing ventilators, and the constant crises typical of critical care. These visitors were much younger and stronger than Granddaddy Edge; I was truly fearful that this diminished little man, who seemed to me, as a young mother, to be awfully old and frail, would be completely overwhelmed and paralyzed by the sights and sounds that surrounded his tiny great-granddaughter. Nevertheless, I anticipated his visit with eager appreciation.

In my mind's eye, still, I can see this old tobacco farmer stooped with age with his big rough hands that well remembered pushing a plow behind a mule. He was garbed in the required hospital gown as he came creeping down the aisle between the layettes toward **his** tiny great-granddaughter. And, as he came closer, the realization was startling – without hesitation, that was exactly what he had come to see – not the wires or medical tape or the hissing tubes, but **his** great-granddaughter.

One of Granddaddy's favorite expressions when he was amazed or surprised by something was, "I'll be jumped." Thus, those words were the first words out of his mouth. "Well, I'll be jumped," he said in a state of awe-inspired fascination. "Never have I seen anything so tiny. Lila Van and I had a lot of babies and some of them were real tiny, some were so tiny they didn't make it, but never have I seen one this tiny. Just look at those perfect little hands and perfect little fingers and toes- all of them - just perfect. I'll be jumped."

There was no hand wringing or pity party for this tiny one whose life swung in the balance - just complete acceptance of this beautiful child of God; received as his own without need of her ability to earn that love; she simply accepted that love. All she had to do was to "be" his great-granddaughter, and he loved her immediately and deeply. It was not that he didn't see her imperfections, but those imperfections could not obscure or distract his unconditional love.

God is not overwhelmed and paralyzed by our unattractive state of weakness and sinfulness. Through it all, he sees his beloved child. He nurtures us in our weakness. He loves us unconditionally through our ugliness and pain and self-centeredness - willing us back to him, willing us to desire to walk in his ways, willing us to do what is pleasing in his sight for the furtherance of his kingdom.

The Pharisee in our parable from Luke's Gospel seems to be placing all of his faith in his own self-righteousness, in his own good deeds. Somehow he feels the need to tell God how good he is. Somehow he believes he has earned his own way into God's Kingdom, and he wants to be certain that those standing within earshot in the temple will hear his prayer of self-glorification.

Can't you just see the image of him in his glorious robes, with his chest puffed out, smiling at himself as he goes on and on about his goodness. Luke just won't let up on his negative depiction of the Pharisees and his conviction that the mighty will be cast down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. For Luke, the Pharisees represent the major human flaws that we all possess; one is the major human flaw of becoming disillusioned that we have gotten where we are on our own without God – the illusion that somehow our works are to be so highly regarded by God above those of others. The prayer of the Pharisee demonstrates the fine line between humility and pride – the tendency for us to take pride in our humility.

In direct contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector in Jesus' parable is wracked with remorse for his sinfulness, standing far off, he cannot even look up toward heaven. He is bowed low by humility as he begs God's mercy. For the tax collector, it is all about God's mercy – it is all about the need to look to God for his justification purely and succinctly because of his faith in God. It is all about understanding that God loves us so much that there is nothing we can do to make him love us any more; and, God loves us so much that there is nothing we can do to make him love us any less.

When we love someone and when someone loves us, we desire to please that person. How much more does our Father in heaven desire to please us and be pleased by us.

God's mercy comes to us through our humility rather than our ability. It is God's gift of grace. We cannot earn mercy through our own ability; God's grace and mercy are there for us; the price is paid; all we have to do is embrace the gift.

This is not to say that our works are unimportant or unnecessary. Our service within the Body of Christ is a manifestation of our faith. Our good works of praise and worship and mission in the name of Christ cannot be separated from our faith just as we cannot separate the human Jesus from the divine Jesus.

To be justified as God intends for us to be justified, means allowing ourselves to receive this love, to receive the gift of God's grace and mercy, to accept that we are justified by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ our Savior. We just keep being faithful.

The Apostle Paul understood justification by faith. He knew what it was to keep the faith. In his second letter to Timothy, which he writes from prison as somewhat of a last will and testament, he assures us that when our earthly life is over each one who has accepted this gift of grace will receive a crown of righteousness. Like the tax collector, receiving God's gift of mercy through utter humility, we will go home justified, having fought the good fight, having finished the race, having kept the faith.

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