

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Dr. Stephen Hayne
Sunday, June 23, 2024

Romans 3:23-28: *Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*

“I’ve never felt good enough.”

If that’s a feeling you can identify with, then this sermon is for you.

If you can’t identify with feeling not being good enough, well, congratulations; perhaps you can take some mental notes for a friend.

My topic this morning is justification.

As David mentioned a few weeks ago, I wasn’t thrilled when I learned justification was the theme assigned for the Sunday I had agreed to preach

And when I learned that today’s lectionary included the stories of David and Goliath and Jesus’ calming the storm, I wondered if I might be forgiven for tackling one of these more “preachable” texts

But what would it say if your theologian-in-residence shied away from a sermon on theology?

So I stuck to the assigned topic, in the hope there might be something in justification I needed to hear; and boy was there

It’s a scary thing to admit in public, not feeling good enough.

But honestly, it’s how I’ve felt a lot of my life.

The roots of that feeling, not surprisingly, go back to my childhood

I grew up the oldest child, in a family that placed a high value on success; and the men in my family offered very concrete examples of what success looked like:

My dad was the doctor on the island where we lived

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My grandfathers were self-made men, who had left their family farms as teenagers and gone on to establish successful businesses

My mom's brother was conspicuously wealthy—and had the cars and the girlfriends to prove it

So, even when I had success in school—winning a spelling bee, say, or making the honor roll—it never felt like enough

In middle school, the pattern continued:

For 7th grade, my parents sent me to Ransom School

“Ransom” being not only the name of the school's founder

but a pretty good estimate of what it cost to send one's child there

Our family didn't really fit the Ransom profile

while my peers waited to be picked up by their chauffeurs, my mom would roll into the carpool lane in our powder blue, faux-wood paneled, Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser station wagon

Standing in that carpool line, it was hard to feel good enough

But the real challenge to my self-esteem was a fellow 7th grader—Steve Hughes was his name—who became a constant reminder of my shortcomings

To put it simply, Steve Hughes was better than me in every category that mattered to a young teenaged boy: He was smarter, better looking, more athletic, funnier, and more suave around the Everglades girls, who attended our sister school

Inside the Ransom bubble, this demigod of early adolescence cast an aura of perfection that was blinding

And because our last names were so similar, I could not escape “the other Steve” or his aura:

he was in my homeroom

he was in my PE class

and he sat just a couple of seats away at daily convocation

Steve Hughes's presence was more than a shadow that loomed over me; it was a moving eclipse I couldn't outrun

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Steve Hughes—the name still sticks in my throat—was a constant reminder of everything I wanted to be, but was not

When we feel less than, we tend to compensate through over-achievement; and that's exactly what I did

For the next few years, I silenced the feelings of not being good enough by pursuing success in every way I could

by the end of high school, I was popular, was earning good grades, was a recruited athlete, and was accepted to Vanderbilt University

I left for Nashville riding high as the reigning Mr. Dunedin High School

But I came crashing back to earth as it became clear that my over-crowded, under-funded public high school had left me woefully unprepared to succeed at Vandy

I walked around campus feeling like an imposter, taunted by internal voices: "There must have been some mistake," they told me; "You don't belong here." "You're just not good enough."

In the years since, those voices have often returned, just when I think I've achieved enough to silence them

By my senior year at Vanderbilt, I found my academic footing, and started imagining a career in Psychology; but then wasn't accepted to graduate school

Encouraged by family and friends, I went to seminary, but left when I realized that everyone there had something I didn't—a definite call to ministry

Even in my 35 years at Rhodes, where I've been fortunate to win every award given to faculty, the feeling of not being good enough has lingered just below the surface, reemerging with every setback or disappointment

Theologically speaking, my problem is a failure to understand justification

If you don't hear the term bandied around much at Idlewild, it's not because justification isn't central to our faith

If you don't believe me, when you get home, take the copy of the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* from your bedside table, and peruse the Index

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You'll find dozens of references to justification, more than to familiar terms like Faith, Gospel, Preaching, Resurrection and Worship

Without doubt, justification is one of those "essential tenets of the Reformed faith" that anyone holding office in our denomination swears to "sincerely receive and adopt"

But what is justification?

To put it simply: to be justified, means to be received into God's favor, "solely by the grace of Christ, and not from any merit of ours"

Justification, in other words, refers to the gift of God's acceptance

If you prefer the children's version, here's how justification is described in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which generations of Presbyterian young people memorized as part of their confirmation process:

The answer to Q.33, "What is Justification?" goes like this:

"Justification is an act of God's free grace/
wherein he...accepts us as righteous in his sight/
only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us/
and received by faith alone."

let's try it together:

good, I'll let you memorize the Catechism's other 106 questions on your own, but you're off to a good start

So justification refers to God's declaration that, if we are in Christ, we are good enough despite our sin, our disbelief, and even our persistent feelings of falling short

In fact, the only thing complicated about justification is our tendency to hedge our bets through self-justification

Just in case God's unconditional acceptance in Christ can't be trusted, we have our own strategies for making sure we're good enough

And that "we" includes many Christians who have gone before us:

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Take the Apostle Paul, for example; in his letter to the Ephesians, he offers a classic description of justification: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is *not your own doing*; it is *the gift of God*—not the *result of works*, so that no one may boast.”

But it took Paul quite a while to get over the idea that God’s approval was something he was entitled to, based on his identity, the identity of his ancestors, and the traditions they passed on to him

You see, after his conversion Paul retained a lot of what he calls “confidence in the flesh”

His reasons for confidence, he described in his letter to the Philippians:

“Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

This was Paul’s religious resume, his case for self-justification.

And if its particulars are difficult to relate to, let me translate them for you:

“My parents were baptized by Paul Tudor Jones; Henry Strock married us; my grandfather designed the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary; my uncle helped integrate the recreation program; the chapel is named after my wife’s mother’s cousin” (and so on)

“confidence in the flesh”: justification by association

Letting go of the conviction that “his people” were what made him acceptable to God was a long and painful process for Paul

But it’s also the reason “justification through faith” became the hallmark of his theology

Martin Luther was another Christian who spent years working a program of self-justification

Terrified that his sin would result in God’s condemnation, Luther entered a monastery, where he pursued a life of intense piety

In fact, he was so obsessed with the prospect of dying in a state of sin, that he went to confession every day to unburden his guilty conscience

Eventually, his exhausted confessor took him aside, and said: “Martin, go away; and don’t come back till you have something interesting to confess”

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Luther eventually escaped this vicious circle of pious self-justification in what is known as his “Tower Experience”

Studying the book of Romans, he kept stumbling over Paul’s statement that in the gospel the “righteousness of God” is revealed

For Luther, this was far from good news, because he was terrified of the “righteousness of God,” assuming it meant condemnation for the unrighteous

Then, in a moment of inspiration, Luther came to understand that God’s righteousness was God’s gift to the unrighteous

the result was transformative

When Luther grasped the concept of justification, his project of self-justification came to an abrupt end

Suddenly he was good enough; the proof lay not in his sinless life, but in his reliance on God’s mercy

Finally, there’s Dietrich Bonhoeffer (for those of you who’ve been anxiously wondering if I would be able to work Bonhoeffer into this sermon, you can relax)

The German theologian was part of a phenomenally successful family

His father Karl Bonhoeffer was a world-famous neurologist whose work is still cited in psychiatric journals

But he also lived in the shadow of three older brothers:

Karl-Friedrich was a physicist who became professor at the University of Berlin at 28, and at 30 discovered the spin isomers of hydrogen

Klaus was a lawyer who became chief Legal Counsel for Lufthansa

Walter was a gifted linguist before his tragic death in WWI

So when Dietrich announced at age 14 that he would study theology, it was in part to stake out an arena for success that no one in his family had thought to enter

and it was an arena well-suited to his gifts:

Studying under some of the world’s best theological minds, he finished his Ph.D. at age 21

At 24, he earned a fellowship to Union Theological Seminary in New York

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At 26, he began his own teaching career at the University of Berlin

But as Bonhoeffer sped along this path of personal achievement, something unexpected happened to him, something he described in a letter to a friend:

“I plunged into my work in a very unchristian way,” he says. “An . . . ambition that many noticed in me made my life difficult. . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it – but I had not yet become a Christian. . . I know that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself. . . . Since then everything has changed. . . . It was a great liberation.”

Given his family of origin, it’s easy to understand how Bonhoeffer could come to view the church as a venue for fulfilling his personal ambitions; an arena for his self-justification

What he calls his “great liberation” was the insight that his quest to be “good enough,” to be justified, had to begin and end in Christ

I don’t know about you, but I find it reassuring to learn that these giants of the Christian faith struggled to feel good enough—struggled to grasp what it means to be justified by faith

And I find it reassuring that their efforts at self-justification sound so familiar:

Like Paul, we, too, wave our religious resumes, hoping to convince ourselves and others that God cannot help but be impressed by our pedigrees

Like Luther, we, too, work and work to please God, hoping we will accumulate enough merits to evade God’s condemnation

Like Bonhoeffer, we, too, chase achievement in an attempt to outrun those haunting feelings of not measuring up

Yet as we pursue our projects of self-justification, we, too, are pursued by the justifying God, who repeatedly reminds us: “you, my child, are good enough”

May we come to believe that; and may we learn to live in the truth that it is our acceptance by God in Christ that makes us good enough, and is the only thing that will ever do so

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.