

I'm Justified!

A Sermon on Romans 3:21-25a,27,28

Year A - Pentecost 2

18 - June - 2017

JJ¹

When you look at a newborn, what are some of the first thoughts that come to mind? Cute—beautiful—miracle—precious—innocent. Innocence is something many people associate with children. The younger they are, the more innocent. Innocent, because they haven't been hurt by this often cruel world. Innocent, because they're still so naive in their view of the world and life. Innocent, because there is so much evil they haven't done or aren't capable of, yet.

But the criminal, that's a different story. Even as they plead their innocence, we often act as judge and jury in our hearts and words, sentencing them and deciding their punishment even before an investigation or trial.

But you know what? There is no difference.

There is no difference between a newborn baby and the most hardened, drug-using violent criminal. How can I say this? Because both die. And so does everyone else in between.

You see, death is the ultimate result or symptom of the one disease that plagues mankind without exception. Sin. This disease is worse than cancer, which is of-

ten described as something that knows no age. This disease does not discriminate. It does not show favoritism. It is a fatal flaw with which each one of us is conceived.

True innocence in the human race is like a unicorn—neither exist. They're both fantasy and figments of wild imaginations. The reality is that "there is no difference...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

But we don't like to hear this. Even though we don't want to hear this, at some level we all naturally agree with it. We agree that all have sinned. We agree that we fall short of expectations. We agree because we have been gifted with a natural knowledge of God's law, written on our hearts. We've also been gifted by God with a conscience to help us judge how well we keep that law.

That we all agree that we fall short to some degree or another is proven in one way simply by the laws of our land. A nation, filled with believers and unbelievers alike, has come together and declared certain things to be right and certain things to be wrong. Yes, this is under attack in this age of relativism in which we live (that you can do what you want, and truth is what you make it to be). Yet

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

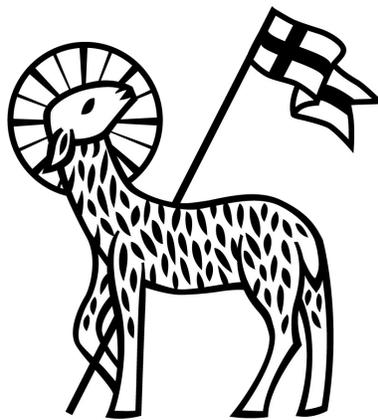
you could take the most “liberated” person you can find, take all that they have, hurt them and publicly slander them, and they will seek justice. Why? Because there is right and there is wrong.

But there are two problems we face. The first is that our conscience is flawed because of sin. This reveals itself as we say some things are wrong, when they are not. And the more common, when we say things are acceptable, when in fact that are sinful. The second problem is that we imagine that we can justify ourselves. That is, we think we can balance the scales in our favor.

The human heart is always trying to save itself. And it does this in two ways: 1) by applying false righteousness/goodness; and 2) by unrighteously judging others to “improve” our status.

Just think of how zealously you try to justify your behavior and words. We do this when we know that something is wrong and we find some way to make it acceptable or even good for us to do. The child who eats a snack 20 minutes before dinner defends herself saying, “But I was hungry!” The young man defends his living and sleeping together with his girlfriend saying, “We can’t afford to live apart.” —or— “We love each other.” —or— “She doesn’t feel safe to be alone.”

Maybe you justify your abuse of drugs or alcohol saying, “Life is too difficult. I need a release!” Maybe you justify your viewing of pornography saying, “I’m not getting what I need! As long as no one knows, no one will be hurt.” Maybe you justify your withholding of taxes you owe the government saying, “The government has plenty of money. Anyways, I need it and the government is just going to waste it!” You justify your hatred and grudges saying, “Well, they hurt me first!” You justify giving yourself the first-fruits of your labor and giving God the leftovers, saying, “Well, I earned it. It’s my money to do with as I please!”



If there is anything we’re addicted to, it’s trying to justify ourselves. It’s trying to create our own “Not Guilty” verdict in the courtroom of our hearts, humanity and even the courtroom of God. Yet all this justifying only

leaves us where we started: “there is no difference...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All this justifying only leaves us with the same sentence: death.

We cannot justify ourselves. We need someone to come and earn a “Not Guilty” verdict for us. We need someone to restore our relationship with God. And that’s what the Christian faith is all about. Paul writes: “But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the

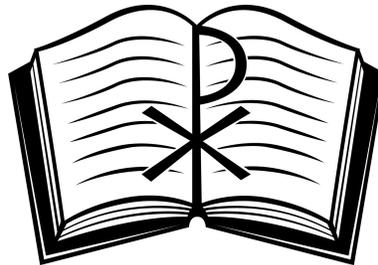
Prophets testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood."

God justified the world, declared it forgiven, by putting all our sins on public display. But he didn't do it through us. He doesn't have us stand before the world and tell everyone every sin we have ever acted out, or spoken, or even thought. He didn't do that because that would never restore our ruined relationship with him.

No, God put all our sin, all our debt on public display for all the world to see through his Son!!! God redeemed, bought back, the world by "publicly displaying [Jesus] as the seat of atonement." This is a beautiful picture Paul paints. Very vivid to a Jewish reader, and something we need a lesson on to appreciate. Paul is reminding us of the mercy seat or seat of atonement on the Ark of the Covenant. If you've ever seen Indiana Jones and the Ark of the Covenant, you know what it pretty much looked like. Two cherubim angels on top of the lid of the ark. It was there that the high priest once a year sprinkled the blood of atonement, first for himself, then

for the whole nation of Israel to atone for their sins. It all pointed ahead to Jesus who would actually make us at one with God through the sacrifice of his life and blood on the cross.

It was there on the cross that God showed the world just how much he hated sin and sinners, and yet loved them at the exact same time. God the Father put all our sins on public display by putting every one of them on his holy Son so that he wasn't holy any longer. The Father turned his back on his Son because his Son became what he hated. The Father hated and punished Jesus in our place. Jesus paid our debt to make us at one with God.



God did this so that just as we all are the same in falling "short of the glory of God," we would also be treated the same by being

"justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

But God couldn't stop there. Yes, our debt had been paid through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God had declared the world forgiven, but God still needed to move that payment from his bank account into our spiritual bank account. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross wouldn't mean anything to us unless it belonged to us personally.

Paul makes very clear that God doesn't get Jesus' righteousness into our hearts by having us keep all his laws as best we can. No, that would never work. Paul

writes, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe.”

Four different times in our short reading Paul plainly says that we are justified, that we are declared forgiven, through faith. And faith is not our work. We cannot believe on our own or choose to believe. Remember, we all by nature fall short. We all by nature are spiritually dead. Faith is God’s gift which he freely gives us just as he gave his Son to be put on public display to pay our debt. That’s why Paul writes, “What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle—by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law.”

Dear friends, God has done all this for you so that you can confidently proclaim: **“I’M JUSTIFIED!”** Through faith in Jesus, you have real innocence before God! Jesus’ holiness and purity rests on you! He did this so that you would live a life filled with thoughts, words and actions that need no justifying, but are all pleasing in God’s sight, even if they aren’t in the eyes of the world. God has justified you freely by his grace so that you can stand before Christ the Judge on the Last Day and know you will hear from his

own lips the verdict I declare to you today: “Not Guilty!” Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for “To God Alone Be The Glory”. This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn’t about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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