

Amazing Grace, Part II: Justifying Grace

Romans 3:21-25; 4:13-16; 5:6-8

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Today's good news is that God pardons our sin. Grace, "amazing grace," justifies us, puts us in right relationship with God. Like the margin of your bulletin we justified—lined-up, squared away—to walk tall in the light of God's assurance.

This is the second of three messages on "grace," God's love, freely given; messages that are self-consciously "teaching" sermons. I'd ask you to follow the texts in your study Bible or the pew Bible, and because the church notices left an empty page, there is a place to write notes if you wish, particularly of scripture references that we will not have time to turn to but you may wish to examine later.

I made the point last week that our hymnal is also a teaching tool. Take just a moment with me and open your hymnal to Roman numeral pages viii and ix, the fourth and fifth pages in. There you will again see the three iterations of grace. Last week I spoke of prevenient grace (bottom of page viii), the grace that "runs before" anything we say or do. Today we look at justifying grace (top of p. ix) with its components of pardon and assurance. Next week we will explore sanctifying grace.

Last week's message ended with the story of John Newton, who turned away from the sin of the slave trade to work for its eradication and who wrote "Amazing Grace." That's what repentance is: turning around, away from sin and toward God. One definition of sin is "missing the mark." The metaphor is that of an archer who misses the bull's eye. We miss the mark of God's high calling for us by action, or lack of action, that is at odds with God's love for us.

But then what? If we repent and acknowledge our wrong doing, or silence in the face thereof, ought not we to be punished?

In the world's economy: yes. How many of you have ever been called for jury duty? Me, too! How many have ever served? I came close once, called for the *voir dire* and then back to the waiting room, only to learn the trial had been settled out of court. The guilty party agreed to their punishment.

This notion of "justification" comes precisely out of this context. In the Apostle Paul's day, it was a legal term, related to justice, fairness, reward, goodness and righteousness. The theological image is God as righteous Judge, holding us accountable according to standards of law, of right and wrong. In the Divine Court, there are no out-of-court settlements. Only those who keep the law are justified, or pronounced good. But there's that pesky Romans 3:23, p. 1026 in your pew Bible: *...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...* Uh-oh! From the divine viewpoint, no one keeps the law perfectly and so all of us deserve punishment.

Yet in God's economy, look what happens in the next two verses: *"they (sinners) 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..."* In other words, to exact justice there has to be a penalty for sin, but God, out of love, takes the penalty for our sin. Our role, as the convicted yet pardoned party, is to accept by faith the intercession and forgiveness of God.

Now, I don't know about you, but there is this voice inside my head. Especially on a summer Sunday when the weather is warm and we could be many other places. And the voice says, *"Hey, pastor. Take it easy. Lighten up. We're basically good people. I don't kill. I don't steal. I don't even cheat on my income taxes, let alone my wife."* Maybe there is no one here who has done those things. Or maybe we have. Either way, the scripture is clear: everyone has missed the mark, missed the bull's eye.

Yet too often, instead of acknowledging our brokenness, accepting the forgiveness of God and seeking to make amends, we choose a different kind of justification: self-justification. Instead of the freeing power of God's love, we choose rules by which we measure ourselves. Don't get me wrong. "*There is a place for rules,*" says this son a retired state trooper and federal investigator. Laws, secular and religious, are rules created to protect the defenseless and set boundaries and expectations of agreed-upon behavior. The Ten Commandments are religious rules. In fact, the word "religion" comes from the same root as the word "rule." Rules have their place.

But there are a plethora of problems with rules, especially religious ones. They often proscribe the least we should do. Compare Exodus 20:3-17 (Ten Commandments) with Matthew 5:21-30 (Sermon on the Mount). If we are good at keeping rules they reinforce feelings of superiority. If we aren't, our failure can reinforce our feelings of inferiority. Most rules cannot be kept all of the time. We encounter situations for which there are no rules. And perhaps most important for the "people called Methodist," whose "heart-strangely-warmed" faith is so uniquely tied to the power of the Holy Spirit, rules cannot legislate attitude.

St. Paul, who wrote this letter, was better than most at keeping rules. As Saul, he was a Pharisee, a religious lawyer. But Acts 9:1-19 describes his conversion on the Damascus road, an encounter with a Voice and blinding Light that demanded "Why do you persecute me?" Paul soon learned the Voice was Jesus.

So please look with me then at Romans 4:13-16, Bible p.1027. In the place of rules comes faith, in the gift of love and the giver, God. God's legacy, our inheritance, of love depends on faith. The theological expression is "justification by faith through grace." We are put in right relationship with God (justified) by trusting in God (faith) who took our punishment (grace). My

friend and colleague, the Rev. Ariel Ferrari, speaks of growing up in Argentina where Christians don't even talk of "religion," except as meaning "superstition." They speak only of "faith."

This faith comes to each of us in different ways. For some it comes as it did to Paul, a sudden conversion on the Damascus Road of our lives. For others it is more "evolution" than "revolution," described by the German-speaking Methodist William Otterbein as "a more perfect consciousness of God in Christ." For John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, it was the culmination of a long struggle that resulted in the experience of his "heart strangely warmed."

Yet if faith is so life-changing, so positive, why don't we trust more? Why do we continue to trust more in ourselves, self-justifying instead of trusting the gracious gift from a generous Giver? Because God's love is so unimaginable through the finitude of human sight. Please look at Romans 5:6-8, Bible p.1027. Paul nails many of us pretty well: *"...rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."*

Since it is an unimaginable gift, it is hard to accept it. The story is told of a hiker along a narrow trail whose footing gave way and they slipped down an embankment toward a cliff. Just before they fell to certain destruction, they grabbed a sapling that bent but held, leaving them hanging desperately over the edge. Too far over the edge to pull themselves up, and too high in the air to risk anything but death, they were in a desperate situation. Cries of help were not heard. Finally, in desperation, the person said, *"God, if you're out there, help me. I know I haven't been in church much and I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but God, if you're out there, just answer!"* And to the hiker's utter amazement a voice said, *"I'm here. What do you want?"* Out of shock the hiker almost let go, but they swallowed hard and said,

“God, you know everything, you see me here, help me.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get me off this cliff! I’ll do anything! I promise. I’ll read in church. I’ll sing in the choir! I’ll serve on the Finance Committee. I’ll teach 8th grade Sunday School. I’ll do anything!

Anything?

Anything!

All right. You only have to do one thing.

Anything!

Let go.