3/16-17/19 Justifying Grace Rev. Amy Haines

Romans 10:8b-13 Lent

At Christmas and for birthdays, we are often expected to give gifts to those with whom we have close relationships. Family members, close friends, colleagues, teachers. Sometimes the gifts we give are tangible presents. At other times the gifts we give are experiences or words of affirmation.

Outside of those standard times of gift giving, have you ever received a gift that was totally unexpected? Something you did not earn, something that was not based on an expectation of reciprocity, something that you never anticipated in a million years?

In 2003 Ken and I were on vacation in Chicago and attended the early morning worship service at the nearby United Methodist Church. The service had maybe 20 people there, so it was evident we were visitors. After conversing with the couple in front of us for about 5 minutes, they suddenly handed us 2 tickets to that evening’s performance of the Chicago Pops Orchestra. They didn’t know us. We didn’t know them. Yet through a shared love of music,

we were given an unexpected gift that we could never repay, and which was given with no strings attached.

During this season of Lent, I invite you to ponder the unexpected gift of God’s grace offered to each and every one of us. During this season of Lent, I invite you on a journey to better understand the nuances of God’s grace in our lives, grace that begins before we are born, is with us throughout our lives, and transitions into eternal life at our deaths.

This grace is at the heart of God. This grace is the core of God’s nature.

Last weekend we defined this grace as the gift of God’s unconditional love for us.

As United Methodists who follow in the footsteps of John Wesley, grace is a central component of our faith journey, this lifelong grace that never stops reaching out to us in love. John Wesley called this his “Scripture way of salvation.”

..“While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as ‘prevenient grace,’ continues in ‘justifying grace,’ and is brought to fruition in ‘sanctifying grace.’”

-William Willimon United Methodist Beliefs, chapter 6

Thinking of grace in these terms remind us that the grace of God is active before we are ever aware of it, leads us to faith in Jesus, then encourages us to live by such faith the rest of our earthly lives.

Last week we began this journey of grace with thanksgiving for God’s prevenient grace, the grace that comes before we are ever aware of God. Before we know God’s name, before we know anything about Jesus, God is loving us, wooing us, reaching out to us, drawing us into a deeper awareness of who God is and who we are as God’s beloved.

This prevenient grace is not based on anything we have done, or who we are in society. This prevenient grace reaches out to us even when we are chasing the gods of society, the gods of success and appearance and independence. This prevenient grace reaches out to us even when seek to reject or run away from God. Prevenient grace is the good news that God loves us no matter what, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God will always seek to love us into a relationship with God, through faith in Jesus.

This prevenient grace is present throughout our lives, until we recognize God’s unconditional love for us. Once we recognize such love, we then move from prevenient grace to justifying grace, from the grace that comes before to the grace that brings us to faith in Jesus.

Justifying grace is still God’s unconditional love for us. But now that love is shown to us through the forgiveness of all our sins and God’s total acceptance of us. This love is shown to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consider the justified margins on a page. They line up the text, to the left, to the right, or on both sides. When the margins are justified, then are lined up.

When we are justified, then our lives are lined up right with God. We are forgiven our sins.

In fact, God wipes away any record of our sins. We are then lined up back into a right relationship with God, recognizing that God is our God and we are God’s people.

I once heard this justification described as a restored relationship with God “just as if I’d never sinned.”

This justifying grace, however, reminds us this is not something we can do on our own power.

We cannot forgive our own sins. We cannot have our sins forgiven through good works or a good life. Forgiveness is not something that can be bought, sold, bartered for or given away. While that may be true of our forgiveness of one another, of our pardoning of sins done against us, what we do does not gain us a right relationship with God.

We are only restored to a right relationship with God through God’s justifying grace. We cannot earn it, and we do not deserve it, yet once again, God offers us the gift of unconditional love through the forgiveness of our sins.

Several decades ago the well-known evangelist Rev. Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town when he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court.

When in court, the judge asked Rev. Graham, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Rev. Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars -- a dollar for every mile you went over the limit." Suddenly the judge recognized the famous minister. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid--but I am going to pay it for you." The judge took a ten-dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner!

"That," said Rev. Graham years later, "is how God treats repentant sinners!"

*-Progress Magazine*, December 14, 1992. Sermonillustrations.com:grace

The Law says that all of us, even Billy Graham, need to pay for our sins, to make amends when we disregard the law. But God’s grace says to us, like the judge to Billy Graham in court, your sins are forgiven, your debt is paid, you are free to go and live the life you were created to live.

No matter who we have been or what we have done, no matter how far we have run from God and faith in Jesus, God still looks at us, loves us, forgives us and accepts us.This is true for all of us, no matter our background.

In our Scripture today from the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome, Paul is striving to remind even the Jews that they can be justified by faith in Jesus, not made righteous through what they do.

“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives richly to all who call on him.All who call on the Lord’s name will be saved.” (12-13 CEB)

The Jews believed that they had to strictly adhere to the Law to gain a right relationship with God. They had specific lists of what they could and could not do. Yet strict adherence to the Law was almost impossible. Such righteous living also set up clear barriers between God’s people, between those who adhered and those who due to life’s circumstances could not fully keep kosher or celebrate the Sabbath or welcome the foreigner in their midst.

In contrast to such righteousness that came through following the Law, justification is when we are considered worthy and brought to right relationship by God’s own action, by God’s own grace, by God’s own love.

Yet think about our human relationships. How many people around us, and how many of us, struggle because we believe that we have to justify ourselves to others by what we do.

Forgiveness is not a part of many of our relationships. We face pressure to behave the way others expect us to behave, and be judged according to societal pressures.

At the Believe Tour last month, speaker Heather recognized that for many middle schoolers, their identity is mostly based on performance, appearance, or relationships. They are justified by who they connect with, where they live, what grades they receive, what activities they participate in, or what image they project. Heather went on to remind us that God justifies us on our identity as God’s beloved, not on our social status or academic achievements. I believe this is true for us at any age.

I like how Pastor David Lose talks about understanding God’s love by reflecting on our healthy relationships. He wrote:

Love, in fact, is the key to understanding justification. Think about it: we do not remain in relationship with people based on their perfect behavior but rather out of love. (And let’s not forget that those most important to us also remain in relationship with us despite our many shortcomings.) Love and forgiveness – these are the key elements of justification because they initiate and maintain relationship.

--David Lose “The Power of Being Justified” Lk 18.9-14 10-20-16 davidlose.net

In the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker both had churches in London. On one occasion, Parker commented on the poor condition of children admitted to Spurgeon's orphanage. It was reported to Spurgeon however, that Parker had criticized the orphanage itself. Spurgeon blasted Parker the next week from the pulpit. The attack was printed in the newspapers and became the talk of the town.

People flocked to Parker's church the next Sunday to hear his rebuttal. "I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead." The crowd was delighted. The ushers had to empty the collection plates 3 times.

Later that week there was a knock at Parker's study. It was Spurgeon. "You know Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed.”

*-Moody Monthly*, December, 1983, p. 81. Sermonillustrations.com:grace

God’s justifying grace that forgives us and accepts us is grounded in God’s forgiving love for us.

Yet the only way for God’s gift of forgiveness to take root in our lives, the only way we can receive such forgiveness and grace, is through our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Faith that Jesus is God’s Son sent as a gift to the world. Faith that through Jesus’ death on the cross our sins have been forgiven. Faith that through Jesus’ resurrection we are restored to new ways of living as God’s beloved.

Justifying grace brings us to a moment of decision—will we claim a faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

Our Scripture from Romans today proclaims:

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” (9-10NRSV)

Our salvation, the forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of relationship with God, is not because of anything we have done. We cannot earn our salvation. Yet we do need to receive our salvation, and to do so is to claim faith in Jesus. To say what we believe, then live in response to what we say.

I like how Eugene Peterson translated these verses:

“It’s the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God—“Jesus is my Master”—embracing, body and soul, God’s work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That’s it.

You’re not “doing” anything; you’re simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you.

That’s salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: “God has set everything right between him and me!”” (9-10 MSG)

Prevenient grace leads us to an awareness of God’s love for us. Justifying grace leads us to faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord not only leads to the forgiveness of our sins, but also a desire to live by the ways of Jesus. Faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord not only assures us of eternal life with God in heaven, but also calls us to new ways of living here and now. So justifying grace leads us to sanctifying grace, a lifelong journey to be led by the Holy Spirit into a life more like Christ each and every day.

As we continue on this journey of Lent, we will now turn to how God’s grace makes an impact in our lives. God’s convincing grace turns us away from sin. God’s reconciling grace turns us toward new ways to be in relationship with God and each other. God’s sanctifying grace moves our belief to action, practical living in response to God’s ongoing grace.

Yet before we move forward in faith during this season of Lent,

Give thanks for God’s unconditional love for you.

Give thanks for God’s forgiveness in your lives.

Give thanks for God’s grace by taking a step forward in faith today.

Take that first step of faith and recognize God’s unconditional love for you.

Or take the next step of faith and confess your belief that through Jesus God has forgiven your sins and lined up your relationship with God. Say yes to Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

Pray with me during the final hymn, or turn to someone near you to pray with you.

If you have long believed in Jesus and are on the journey of sanctifying grace, recommit today to loving God and loving neighbor as your response to God’s amazing grace.

Wherever you are today on the journey of faith, in response to God’s grace, remember that God is with you. God’s grace is God’s great love for you.

May we give thanks for such a gift of love, God’s justifying grace, that draws us closer to Jesus, each and every day.

Let us pray.