

Character

May 26, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom. 5: 1-11, Also Read John 16: 12-15)

A man walks into a bar...sits down...orders a drink. The bar tender, obviously a second amendment rights advocate takes out a shotgun, fires one shot into the wall across from the man. The man reaches into his pocket, gives the bartender a nice tip, says thank you and leaves. Why did the man tip the bartender?

My father had 9 brothers. One, my Uncle Marion, got into some trouble when he was a young man and ran off to avoid punishment. I asked my dad about the trouble a couple of times but he would never tell me what the problem was. I asked a couple of my other uncles but they were quiet on the subject as well. I know my grandfather went down to Florida once and to Georgia at least once on a tip from someone about Marion's whereabouts but he had no luck finding him. To this day this uncle remains a mystery to me. I've shared with you before that during the time immediately following my grandfather's funeral as the family was reviewing the guestbook there was a signature for Marion Dickson that was passed around but no one seemed to know of or have seen him there!

Even in his absence, Marion was a character in my life. His absence was a presence that called out to me, begged questions and caused wonder. I have many questions that cannot be answered now, perhaps they will not be answered in this lifetime...perhaps not even in eternity. I do not know how God will work in these questions or even if God will work in these questions. They are my questions and I

have had them for many years but apparently I cannot bear the answers to them now! How do I resolve them? How do I live with them?

I think we all have characters in our lives. We have people we wonder about...people we are curious about...people we just cant quite figure out. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to be able to ask the questions, other times we just have to wait and let the questions answer themselves.

In our gospel lesson for today Jesus says He has many things to tell us now but we can not bear to hear what He has to say. He promises instead that the Holy Spirit will bear the truth to us and will reveal to us everything! Everything!! Wow! Welcome Holy Spirit!

Wouldn't it be great to have access to all knowledge? Wouldn't it be great to have access to all faith? Wouldn't it be great to know that regardless of the situation in your life or your circumstance or your location you would be able to deal with anything that comes your way? It sounds like that is what Jesus is offering today in John's gospel. And yet we come back to my Uncle Marion! This character just keeps causing chaos in my consciousness! My dad had 9 brothers. The other 8 were present and an active part of my life. Why the curiosity? Why did the man tip the bartender? So I go back and read the text again.

The reality is we want to hear the text the way I have portrayed it above. We want to have access to all God has created as knowledge. We want to have access to such great faith that we can rely on God and ourselves in any situation, however that is not quite what the text says. The promise Jesus makes is that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth! Truth is different from knowledge. In Chapter 14 Jesus says I AM the Truth! In chapter 18 Pilate asks Jesus, "What is the truth?" The reality is they are the question and the answer to the question at the same time. Jesus is the Truth. Jesus is what the Holy Spirit reveals! It is kind of like the children's time questions we ask each week. The answer is always Jesus! The answer is always Jesus! So Why did the man tip the bartender?

The Spirit will glorify Jesus the text says. A couple of weeks ago we talked about what it means to be glorified. Glorification is not an unmerited adoration, but rather it is a recognition. The Spirit will make Jesus recognizable. The spirit will make known the truth of Jesus! On this Trinity Sunday, we want the truth. The confusion of three in one or one in three while they are spoken of still leaves us wondering? What is God? Who is God? Why did the man tip the bartender? We want the truth!

The truth is, as the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that if I had all knowledge and all faith so as to move mountains, even then I am still nothing! There is still something lacking. What is missing? What is the truth. The truth is where we meet Paul in his letter to the Romans today. The truth is in our relationship with God and Paul is quite clear about it!

We are justified Paul says. If you have your bible turn to the text. Paul uses the word twice. What do we know about words used more than once in a passage? In Bible Study we learn that if it is repeated it is probably important. In this case, Paul has spent the better part of two chapters telling us how we are justified so he thinks it is extremely important! Before we learn how we are justified however, we need to learn what it means to be justified. It may be important to Paul, but is it important to us?

To be justified means to be made right. Those who are carpenters know that when something needs to be trimmed just a little bit or made a little more even it is justified. There is not much adjustment, but just enough to make it right. Cooks justify broth by adding just a little flour to the stock...not much but just a little to make it right. In this case, Paul is arguing that we are justified with God. We are made right with God. We are not far from right, but there are some adjustments that need to be made. That sounds kind of important!

Paul uses the word twice as we said. In verse one he says we are justified by faith. He has spent two chapters making this argument and now he wants to conclude. We are justified by faith as opposed to being justified by works. As protestant Christians, this is fundamental to who we are! Abraham, Paul says was justified before he was circumcised. This means that before Abraham made his act of profession, he already believed. James says it differently in His epistle. He says, "Show me your faith, and I will show you my works." He wants us to know that our faith necessarily produces works but that works are not evident or even required before faith. Faith is the foundation of or worship and we are made right by our faith!

Paul also says we are made right by the blood of Jesus. As the song says, "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!" In other words, even if we were tempted to justify ourselves with God, there is no work that we could do that would be sufficient to make us right with God! It is only the work of Christ on the cross that justifies us and makes possible our salvation. In Romans 10: 9-10 it says, "because 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." Our faith and Jesus' work make our salvation possible!

Through this justification we are at peace with God! Paul's argument is that before Jesus' intervention and our coming to faith through Him we were at odds with God! We did not have a right relationship with God and could not hope to attain salvation. With Christ there is peace, shalom where nothing is missing, nothing is broken. God through Jesus has made possible the restoration of a relationship that God intended even from the beginning of creation! But wait...Why did the man tip the bartender? What is the truth?

A part of the truth is revealed this morning in verse 6. While we were still weak, Christ came to save the ungodly! Our weakness came from the destruction of the relationship God intended from the creation

of the world. That relationship with the first man and woman was one of trust and faithfulness. Adam and Eve sought knowledge. They sought the knowledge of good and evil, the one thing God prohibited in all of their existence. When they ate of the tree of the fruit of knowledge they weakened their relationship with God by breaking that trust!

Have you ever had a promise broken? I am sure all of us have. When the promise is broken the person we held that promise with sometimes moves out of our lives. More often however we try to forgive that person and begin to restore a relationship of trust. You know that restoration takes a long time. When the promise is broken, trust is destroyed. Trust can be reestablished but not quickly. We start with small steps and gradually as the person demonstrates fidelity in small things they are given greater parts of our trust. Perhaps over time full trust can be reestablished.

We were weak because we had not reestablished trust with God. We could never be as strong as we were intended to be because we could never be trusted even in the small things. God gave an outward sign of our relationship, circumcision! Overtime it became just an event, an exercise in religious participation that had no spiritual effect. God gave the law. Over time we broke every part of it. We were not able to regain God's trust because we continued to reject God's effort to reach out to us so that we might restore trust.

Today we experience that weakness still. We practice our religion not as a true sign of our love for God but as a symbol of status. We come to church but we become so busy being seen at church that we forget why we have come. Religion has become a mockery of worship. The law is mocked. We spend hours studying scripture not to obey but to look for ways to obfuscate! We try to find ways to make God's law more flexible so we can find wiggle room for ourselves but we are unwilling to allow wiggle room for others. We are weak.

The truth however is that while we were weak, while we still are weak, Christ came to save the ungodly. In the fullness of time, God recognized that if we were to be restored to right relationship with God the first step would have to be his! He would have to look past our sin and to the possibilities that existed at the moment of our creation! God could not ignore sin! God cannot tolerate sin. Let me be clear here! God cannot tolerate sin of any kind. Those who try to point fingers at adulterers or homosexuals or thieves or murderers and say, "Thank you Lord that I am not a sinner like them!" have condemned themselves in God's eyes. In Romans 2 Paul says that if we judge we are guilty of the same sin as those who committed it. Judging others and condemning them is God's work and not ours! There is no degree of sin but there is only sin! We are all sinners, "saved by Grace" the grace of the one who came to save even the ungodly! Why did the man tip the bartender? What is the truth?

The truth is in another word used frequently in this passage. The word reconciled or reconciliation is used three times in this passage! It is probably important as well. Accountants are familiar with this

word. People who balance their checkbooks are also familiar. To reconcile is to balance! Each month when a person balances their checkbook they look at their expenses and reconcile them to their income. If the amounts are equal then the books are reconciled. If income exceeds expenses the extra income is moved to savings so the amounts can be reconciled. If expense exceeds income additional assets must be added to reconcile the account.

Christ reconciled our account with God. We could not worship with conviction and our actions became more for our own satisfaction than for God's glory. We could not keep the law because we wanted to spend time pointing fingers at others who were breaking the law. Day after day, week after week, month after month our account with God was not in balance. Christ reconciled our account with God once and for all time and He did it on the cross! Through his action for an unrepentant, weak and unfaithful people he balanced the books with God!

Our justification comes then from Christ's reconciliation! In Christ's efforts and not in our own have we been made right with God! Because of Christ's efforts and not our own we are at peace with God! Because of Christ's efforts and not our own we boast! Paul uses this word three times as well in this passage. We boast because we stand hoping for the Glory of God. We boast because of our sufferings. Finally we boast of God in Godself!

This word boast requires some explanation as well. In the 21st century we think of boasting as a prideful exclamation. Boasting is seen as cockiness or arrogance. Boasting is frowned upon! In the original Greek however, boasting can also be understood as rejoicing! When we think of rejoicing we can easily understand Paul's use of the word.

We rejoice at sharing the glory of God! As we recognize our failure at worshiping and keeping the law we marvel at Christ's success at setting the record straight for us! We rejoice that once again we can even have hope of being restored to right relationship, but if we stop there we fall short. We must rejoice Paul says at the faith produced by Christ's actions. We are justified not by our works but by our FAITH in the work of Jesus. We can only boast of sharing God's glory if we believe that this glory comes only by the grace of God given through Jesus Christ!

We rejoice at our sufferings Paul says. We know that suffering produces endurance. Today as we honor our fallen heroes we bear witness to his statement. During each of the conflicts we have engaged in as a nation there have been moments of incredible suffering. Many who are with us this morning have experienced that suffering first hand as they fought for the freedom and liberties God had given us. Some of us have experienced this suffering as a third party, willingly making sacrifices for the success of our national effort. Others have experienced this suffering through the loss of loved ones who paid the last full measure of devotion for the privilege of freedom given by God! All of us know that through these sufferings we have learned to endure in the world. Today we do remember all who suffered, all

who died and all who made possible the continuation of the freedoms and liberties that have been endowed upon us and upon all through the generosity of our creator!

Paul is talking beyond the world however beyond this world. Our sufferings in this world build the faith upon which we are both justified and reconciled. Because we believe in the work of Jesus on the cross and because we believe in the work of God in resurrection we are and will be persecuted in this world. Paul demands that we recognize that persecution and that we suffer it continually enduring the slings and arrows of the world so that in our endurance we might develop the same kind of character as has been demonstrated by the fallen heroes we honor today!

This endurance produces character. We have all had characters pass through our lives; characters like my Uncle Marion who was not able to endure the consequences of his actions. Witnessing these characters allows us to persevere in our own struggles so we can boast not of our strength but of our faith! Development of this character produces hope and hope never disappoints.

Hope is joyful expectation! Hope is the anticipation of that which has been promised and the ultimate fulfillment of that promise! Hope never disappoints. Even as we wait, watch, wonder at what God is up to; even as we despair at God's seeming delay we can never give up hope for as Paul says, hope assures us that God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which we have received! So still why did the man tip the bartender? What is the truth?

It has been right in front of us all morning! We have danced around it every step of the way through this message. Paul says no person would die for a righteous person, though perhaps someone might actually dare to die for a good person. What then could have provoked Jesus to die even for the ungodly?

In the passage I noted earlier from 1Corinthians 13 Paul says I could have knowledge and I could have faith but unless I have love I have nothing. In the letter to the Romans that we study this morning it is said this way: Hope never disappoints because the LOVE of God has been poured into our hearts and This proves God's LOVE for us, that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us! Jesus is the truth and the truth is love!

It is God's love that makes possible our justification! Without God's willingness to move past our sin and our faithlessness there could be no offer of atonement through Jesus Christ! Without love there could be no Grace given so that we might be recognized in the full glory of God. Without love we would stand convicted of all our sins and we would be forever hopeless but Hope never disappoints because hope is always rooted in love!

When Jesus says in John's gospel that He is the Truth what he means is that He is God's love that has come into the world and has become flesh and has walked among us. In Paul's letter to the Romans he reminds us that while we are reconciled by the blood of Christ we are even more saved by His life! His life then becomes the truth by which we measure our own lives. Now that we are the Body of Christ we are responsible to live according to the standards of Christ's life! We are to be LOVE! We are to be the Love that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which we have been given! We are to be the character that comes into the lives of others and reflects God's love and grace in every aspect of our lives.

A man walks into a bar, orders a drink, sits down. The bartender takes his shotgun from under the counter and fires past the man's ear into the wall across from them. The man stands, pays for the drink, leaves a generous tip and says a profound thank you then leaves! Why did the man tip the bartender? The man had hiccups! The gunshot accomplished the intended effect of the drink. The man, out of gratitude gave the bartender a generous reward!

God is calling us to be characters in this world. We can choose to have character and boast of God's great love for us or we can choose otherwise. How will you decide? What is your truth? Amen!