

Psalm 5

¹Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing.

²Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray.

³O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

⁴For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you.

⁵The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

⁶You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

⁷But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house, I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you.

⁸Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

⁹For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues.

¹⁰Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their many transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you.

¹¹But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.

¹²For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover them with favor as with a shield.

Galatians 2:15-21

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified

with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

You know, it's hard to write a sermon when the weather is 80 degrees and sunny, and the wind feels nice on the way to the car to visit a parishioner...and then you come back to see, for the second day in a row, a beautiful deer, nuzzling her head on a small pole near the trees.

As a deer longs for water...so my soul longs for you, O God...

But, somehow, the Spirit works within me to produce a good work, though the words may not always flow rhythmically, sometimes a thought comes from this space and openness with God. Despite the fact that the sky, the air and the summer possibilities are weaving together a combination of distractions – which can really ruin a perfectly quiet sermon writing endeavor, I feel quite assured even as I stare at a blank white page.

I wonder if Paul was a bit distracted at times, writing all those letters in the midst of travelling, or finding himself

in prison. Was he caught gazing out at the same sky wondering what word God had for him to preach?

We continue today with Paul's argument that the gospel is for everyone...not just for Jews "by birth."

Paul is beginning his argument to the Galatians that it is not by works that we are saved, or by completing a set of tasks laid out by the "Law" but, we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

You see, the Law as understood by the Jews was literally "torah" which meant teaching and instruction. Why would that be so bad?

The Torah was what God gave to the people to follow, moral and social codes to live by. It was a written code, what we now understand as the entire Hebrew Bible. In 200 CE another legal tradition was codified and is known as the Mishnah.

Paul knew the law, but since he became an evangelist for Jesus Christ, he wanted to make people aware that one needed to not become a Jew first to receive God's salvation.

Here is where the scriptures are confusing. Paul says in some places that Gentiles "in Christ" should strive to fulfill it and keep its commandments (1 Cor 7:19; Rom 8:4, 13:8-10, Gal 5:14) but in other places he says the law is the "old dispensation" inglorious and incomplete, compared to the gospel of Christ (Gal 3:16, 24-26; 4:10, 19-22; 5:21-31; 2 Cor 3:12-15; Rom 3:20; 4:15, 5:20, 10:4).

How can Paul say both things? In Romans he says "The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good?" (Romans 7:12).

Maybe Paul is feeling emotionally tied to his past and tradition, something we can all relate to when a new hymnal is chosen, or when the church considers adding a new statement of faith to the Book of Confessions, something currently under consideration in our denomination.

Or, maybe as some scholars suggest, Paul "preached a two covenant theology: Torah for Jews, Christ for Gentiles."

In the Oxford Companion to the Bible, scholars also add that Paul seems aware of his own conflicting feelings. Often having “unthought-out sentimental attachment to his community of origin” and his own statements “forceful, passionate and at times intemperate – defy a consistent interpretation.”¹

What Paul does consistently teach is that when Jesus returns, all the earth will be under God’s dominion.

So, regardless of his interpretation of the Law’s use, necessity, or function for Jews or Christians, he dearly believed that all the world, under God in Christ, would be reconciled.

What Paul’s argument regarding the Law comes down to, if we over-simplify it, is that the Law is ONE-sided...meaning if we choose to do that, it is up to us to follow the right way.

But, if our relationship with God is based upon FAITH in Christ, then that is a two-sided, or multi-faceted relationship. It is based on what GOD HAS DONE in Christ

¹ Pp. 423 The Oxford Companion to the Bible

and it is about us receiving that grace, living it out, believing in God's generous care and mercy, and then sharing that with the world.

It is about life and transformation.

And Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

This might be the most important sentence in this passage.

Whatever anyone believes, as long as we understand that it is in Christ we have life and it is Christ who lives in us...then the rest, well, dare I say it, the rest is just commentary.

And what does Justification mean anyway?

If you think about writing a paper, what are the things you pay attention to? If you are like me, you choose a different font than "Times New Roman." You might get a little crazy and choose "Veranda" or "Calibri." And then, you check to see what size of font you need to use. And if you want to make it look like you wrote more than you

did, you might choose 16 pt. font. And then, if you are writing and you see that your words aren't exactly lined up properly...say, if you are making a two-column document, then you use justification. That's right, "justification is what a computer does to the margins, straightening up the words so they are in right relationship to the page."

This is how God works. God works among us to "straighten us out." Sometimes I like to think of God as a woodworker, carefully sanding down the rough spots, making adjustments to a fine work of art as she pays attention to the knots, scars, scrapes and wounds found in the wood. Sometimes God even puts on a fresh coat of oil, working that into the wood to bring out the beauty.

God justifies us, straightens us out, sets us right.

Justification (the Greek is *dikaiosune*) is also translated as "righteousness" which means "right relationship."

As God works among us, being a "co-creator" with us, we are brought back into right relationship with one another and with God.

Jesus Christ was the one who embodied that right-relationship. And we know from reading, listening and hearing about his ministry that it wasn't always a big party. Jesus took time to get away from all the needy people. Jesus prayed alone, for forty days, and wrestled with his own demons and desires. Jesus fed, dined, nurtured, listened, became the Word made flesh, and taught about God. His ministry was short, shorter than most pastorates, merely 3 years. But, he preached from the moment he was a young teenager until his last breath on the cross.

We have been crucified with Christ.

We have been on a journey with Christ. We have prayed, we have hoped, we have wept...

We have been given a lot to handle. We have been given things which we thought we could not survive, and yet here we are.

We have been tormented in the middle of the night at 3 am by wild and crazy dreams...why is it always 3 am? And we have turned to God in prayer at 3 am.

We have been crucified with Christ.

We have been challenged to let go of things which keep us from loving others. This too dies with Christ.

The new life, the good news, the message Paul preached, deep down, should change us to become more alive in Christ. And if we do get to a point where we are not following some other philosophy or internal law code or set of worldly expectations, but ONLY Christ, then we too might say each and every day "It is Christ who lives in me."

The priority is that we become more Christ-like.

Each and every one of us has growing edges. And don't think because I am standing in a pulpit, or because I have been ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament that I do not have growing to do in my faith. Of course you know this. You have seen me stressed during Holy Week when we have three bulletins to prepare and I have three messages to proclaim in a few days time. You have seen me try something new that just didn't quite click.

And that is OK!

Because I know deep down that it is Christ I serve. It is Christ I am partnering with, this incredible love of God, who chooses to live in me, in us, for the glory of God.

It is for this reason and for the beauty of this call that I open up to God's wondrous teachings. I am able to take risks, because I have experienced God's "hesed" – which is Hebrew for "loving-kindness."

And there were times I was given more than I thought I could bear emotionally and physically. And somehow, God's presence came to me in unexpected and remarkable ways. Ways that transcend this world. Prayers answered before I spoke them, answered in ways I cannot explain.

I learned about Christ living within the community.

And thank God that sometimes there are no words to express why I have chosen this path, this particular faith journey. Because that too is a source of strength...that God chose me first, long before I came to any understanding.

It is the same with you. In baptism God chooses you, calls you by name. God chooses to reach out to you first, before we make any faith statement or declaration of intent to follow.

Maybe a baptism should really be flipped around, done backwards. We should be proclaiming God's grace FIRST by entering into a splashing experience where all we can do is laugh at the water making us wet. What if we celebrated baptism with the unexpected grace of God flowing over us, where the water is sprinkled not just on the baby or person being baptized, or their family, but on the entire congregation, a reminder that God's Grace is forever FIRST...it is God's beautiful bath. God's love comes from a deep well, the deepest we can imagine, and it gushes forth. And whether we like it or not, or worry about our clothing getting all wet, God is inviting us to participate anew.

Can you imagine it? A baptismal service where you all get sprinkled with the waters before you even find out what hymn we are singing for the day?

It would be quite unexpected, but a true reminder that God has initiated this relationship first...and God will forever be there to correct our crooked ways, making things right in our lives, and helping is to proclaim "Christ lives in me."

Say to yourself this week "Christ Lives In Me." It is for Christ I am a servant, and it is Christ who shares my burdens.

This is the good news of the gospel, faith is not about works or following a set of laws, it is about God's grace and our giving that grace a place to grow in us and in our actions.

In the name of our loving God, three in one, Amen.