

What a week it's been! Please remember that God is in control and He is bigger than all of our problems, even a global pandemic! And I have to say that if there were ever a good thing that has resulted from the Corona Virus outbreak it's that many people are now getting back to the basics of hygiene in order to prevent the spread of germs. From properly covering your mouth when you cough, to using hand-sanitizer, to good old fashioned frequent hand washing; one good thing from all this is that many people are getting back to the basics of good hygiene.

Switching gears back to our faith in God, it is good to get back to the basics. Yes, sometimes it's good just to hear once again the core of what we believe, to listen to what brings peace, hope and joy to our hearts. Things that we all need especially now! Romans 5 does just that. Here, the Apostle Paul assures us of the basic, core hope we have when he says, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1).

This sermon is not about what God wants us to do this coming week. It's not about our understanding some deep and mysterious doctrine. It's

not even about how we feel today. No, this sermon is just about being justified. It's all about what God has done and how His deep and mysterious way of doing things shows how He feels about us.

Yet having said that, we begin by looking at ourselves. We begin by realizing once again that we're weak, ungodly, and sinners. We begin by admitting that God needs to save us because we cannot justify ourselves before Him. Of course, weak, sinful, and ungodly is not how we want to see ourselves. If anything, we want to see ourselves as just the opposite. It starts young.

I heard about a school district in the suburbs that recently changed its grading system so that no one can fail. Beginning in the fall of 2016, all three middle schools in the Wayzata school district dropped the traditional A-F grading method and moved to a standards-based 4-3-2-1 system. Under the new method, a 4 would mean that the student is performing above grade-level expectations, a 3 means they are meeting expectations, a 2 means a student is making progress and a one means that a student is attempting to meet expectations. In this school system,

you can only succeed. You're only described in positive terms. That's how we want to see ourselves- as adults too.

Over the past few years there's been some controversy about posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms in this country. I know the reason is to have us follow God's ways in our judicial system, but could you imagine sitting in God's courtroom and He's the judge? That's scary! The Ten Commandments are printed in huge block letters on the wall behind Him. He reads the second commandment, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God." No use of four-letter words. No carelessly saying, "Oh, my God." No justification for calling someone a nasty name because you were angry. Just the commandment staring you in the face, saying, "Did you keep me all the time?" and God asking, "How do you plead?" Guilty as charged.

Should I pick another commandment? How about "You shall not steal?" No greed. No anxiety over money. No cheating on taxes or some other financial form. No buying so much stuff that you can't be generous in giving to those in need. No cheating your family or church or friends

out of time because you are too busy working to make more money. Just the Commandment staring you in the face saying, “Did you keep me all the time?” and God asking, “How do you plead?” Here we cannot plead “making progress”, or even “*attempting* to meet expectations” just *guilty*. Just weak, ungodly, and sinful.

No, we don’t want to be in God’s courtroom with the Ten Commandments on the wall behind Him. His justice would declare us to be unloving, unlovable, helpless, completely unable to do anything of eternal consequence, sinful, and deserving of God’s punishment. That’s core, that’s basic.

What’s true and accurate is the confession of sin we make in the Divine Service: “I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment.” That’s how God sees us if we were standing before Him all by ourselves in His courtroom with Him as judge.

But we're not in His courtroom. We're in His house, His church. We're in the one place where we remember that the greatest injustice of all time has saved us from God's punishment. Here in the church we don't just stare at God's Law and wilt under our guilt. No, we also see Jesus' cross and rejoice in our justification. That's core, that's basic.

Remember that dark Thursday night. Jesus has gone to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It's quiet and His disciples fall asleep. Then a small group of soldiers and religious leaders surround Jesus. One of His disciples, Judas, steps out and betrays Jesus- with a kiss of all things. Peter wakes up and tries to stop the arrest, but Jesus wants no violence here, no rescue. He's going to trial and nothing will stop Him from being accused.

The court's hastily convened. People come forward to make charges, but their testimonies do not agree. Jesus is innocent. Here is the one person Who is inherently good. He is strong, godly, and sinless. No charge can stick against Him except for one that's trumped up. So, an injustice is perpetuated, and Jesus is sentenced to die.

Yet justice *is* served when Jesus is nailed to that cross-God's justice. Our sin could not go unpunished. Our weakness could not be ignored. Our breaking of the Ten Commandments could not be simply excused. No, someone had to die. Someone had to take the eternal punishment, and that someone was Jesus. Our sin and His death combine on a cross and God's justice is satisfied. We are justified, not because of anything we have done, not because of any inherent virtue within us, not because we are somehow deserving. No, we are justified in God's sight when in faith we hold onto Jesus as our one hope, our peace with God, our only reason for rejoicing when we stand before God on Judgment Day.

At home I have a beautiful cross-stitch decoration in a picture frame that a friend from Wisconsin made for me a few years ago. It has a picture of a cross and the words beside it say, "I asked Jesus 'How much do you love me?' He answered, 'This Much' and He stretched out His arms and died." The apostle Paul says it this way: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Remember at the beginning of this sermon I said it was not about how we feel, but

how God feels about us. God loves us, and Jesus on the cross is the deepest expression of His love. That's core, that's basic to what we believe.

Remember when I said this sermon is not about what we do? When it comes to being justified, saved, at peace with God, we can do ***nothing***. Our faith is in Jesus. His blood shed on the cross justifies us. That's core, that's basic to what we believe.

Remember when I said this sermon is not about our ***understanding*** some deep and mysterious doctrine? Well, ***I*** sure don't understand how He could do this, but I'm glad Jesus did something no one else would do. Oh, you might hear of a soldier falling on a grenade to save his buddies or a parent dashing into a burning building to save a child or maybe a stranger risking her life to save a toddler who is running out into a busy street. But Jesus dies for the ungodly no matter how evil that person may be. Jesus dies for the weak and helpless. For the unloving and unlovable. For the sinful and those who can do nothing of eternal consequence. For you and me. Imagine that! That's core, that's basic to what we believe.

But you know something? When you go back to the core, the basics- that we're weak, ungodly, and sinners, yet justified because God's love is shown in Jesus, who, at just the right time, died for us- it makes a difference in how we feel. We rejoice. It makes a difference in what we do. We persevere when we suffer, even more, we become people of character and hope. We love and live for Jesus. And it makes a huge difference in what we know. It's deep and mysterious, yet our faith holds on to one core, basic truth: God's love was shown when Jesus stretched out arms as wide as they could go and died for us. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Yes, it's good to get back to the basics. Amen.