

The Joy of Justification (3/15/20)

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Paul begins this chapter by stating that through justification by faith, we have been granted peace or absolution by Jesus' sacrifice. At the end of his life and during his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus charged Paul, the disciples and their followers with spreading the word about the grace that God has given us.

Paul then goes on to explain that although we have times of sorrow and tribulations, we come out at the end of the tunnel stronger and more sure of the hope that God gives us. His love sustains, comforts and strengthens us through the Holy Spirit who accompanies us in our journeys here on earth.

God knows each and every one of us - he named us in His heart even before we were born. He knows that we are weak and will sin, so He sent His son as a sign of His tremendous love for us.

And still, even though we continue to sin, we are protected or justified by the blood of Jesus in the eyes of God. Paul describes us as God's former enemies but now that we are reconciled to God through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we experience life in abundance. In other words, while Jesus walked on this earth, He taught us how to live, how to pray, and how to treat others in His loving, gentle and generous way, knowing full well how His story was going to end.

Paul also states that having received this reconciliation from God through His Son we should boast of this wondrous gift. Having accepted this sacrifice from Jesus and thus receiving God's grace, we should celebrate this peace with God, as we are no longer enemies but His children. What joyous news!

Finding joy is not always easy in our daily lives - so often we get bogged down by all of the negative messages that we receive on the news, in the newspapers, and on social media. It is so easy to buy into the message that this is a miserable world.

Earlier this month, I read an article in Gather magazine, written by Linda Post Bushkofsky, that was an example of finding and spreading joy to others. In it, and I am paraphrasing her, she wrote that last fall, in the days leading up to the beginning of school, some of the moms in her community hatched a brilliant plan. Nearly every child in their town's elementary school walks to school, so the moms encouraged residents to #chalkthewalk: to write words of encouragement on the sidewalks that the children would be walking on their first day. She loved the idea and dug out her sidewalk chalk, ready to participate.

Linda drew designs on four of the sidewalk squares in front of her house. In one, a smiley face greeted the walkers. In another was a reminder to "Help all," encased in a heart. On another square she wrote, "Be kind" and surrounded the words with multi-colored stick figures standing hand in hand. The final square simply exclaimed, "Spread joy!" She said, "What fun it was to hear the kids and their parents, through the open windows, react to the chalk drawings."

An hour or two later, another thought struck her: “Why not add to the sidewalk drawings with encouraging words so they would see these, too, when walking home after school?” She happened to be working at home that day, so she took a quick break after lunch and added new messages. “You did it!” celebrated one square. “Who made you laugh today?” asked the words in another square. And finally, “Who did you help today?”

As school was letting out, she returned to the open window in her home office and heard the moms walking past to pick up their students squealing with delight, “How cool is that?” One mom and her kindergartener stopped to read each square and answer each question. Two kids on our block wanted their picture taken with the drawings.

God gives us so many moments of joy - we just have to be open to acknowledging them and letting Him know how He made our day.

A lot of those moments of joy happen right here with our church family. We celebrate the birth of our children and grandchildren (and if we are lucky enough) our great-grandchildren. We welcome them into our church family and into a life with Christ when they are baptised. Sunday school prepares them for their first communion through lessons, crafts and song. With joy we celebrate their new status as voting members of our church on the day of their confirmation. And we celebrate anew when our former visitors decide to be installed as new members.

Our weddings are filled with joy and love as we celebrate the commitments of couples as they take their marital vows at God’s altar.

Even our funerals and memorial services use celebration language as we express our love for those who have passed and know that God has welcomed them home in heaven.

All of this joy, love and celebration should not be contained in the walls of our sanctuary - Jesus showed us how to be joyful and live celebratory lives, driven on the grace that was granted to us through His blood. As Martin Luther once said, “Joyfully enjoy the joyful things when they are present”.

I hope that you can learn to look for and savor the big and little moments of joy that come your way. Know that when things do go wrong that God is on your side and use those times to sit back and figure out what you have learned about yourself and how you were able to cope and rise above it.

Please revisit the concept of the “ripple effect” that I spoke about the last time that I preached and share your joy. Remember the old saying, “If you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours!”

Amen.