

Romans 5:1-21

Results of Justification

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.^[e] ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Adam and Christ

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And

the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

June 18, 2017

Romans 5:1-21; Psalm 116

“Retribution, Restoration, and Reconciliation”

Kerra Becker English

Do any of you remember doing literary criticism in high school English your Senior year? I don't remember much, but I do remember getting a list of words or phrases from a poem or book and having to tell what each of them meant. The student teacher we had that year “loved” this assignment. We were supposed to come up with the “one right answer.” Like a deer spotted at the edge of the woods had to mean that the author wanted us to think about *innocence*. We, or should I say I, argued a lot about “The Road Less Traveled” – which is one of the most quoted, most used for advertisements, most interpreted, and likely most misinterpreted poem in all of American literature. Exasperated, that student teacher finally let me get away with saying that there “might” “occasionally” be more than one meaning we can get from a text. I remember her telling the story, perhaps true, perhaps not, that when Robert Frost was asked what his poem meant, he said that it was about a time when he was out walking and saw two roads going in different directions and decided to write about it, so literally, “Two roads [actually] diverged in a yellow wood.” Now, I'm sure he wanted his readers to get more out of it – but even that is one way to approach a poem, or book, by expecting it to be exactly what it says it is. And quite often, that's how people open the pages of the Bible.

But it was with that same desire to look at words from all angles that I began my journey of studying religion – first as an interest in college, and later as a career path in seminary. I've never, ever liked the “one right answer” approach – which is probably what made me a little less successful in things like math and chemistry. I prefer the challenge of interpretation, and I find it

most interesting to coax multiple meanings out of any biblical reading. Not all my religion professors liked this about me either, I'll confess that up front. The Reformed tradition has modes and methods for getting to the right answer, by translating the text from its original Greek or Hebrew, by looking at the writer's style and format (Paul in this case), and by assessing the historical context of the time in which it was written, and we do all this in hopes of blurting out exactly what the writer was trying to say – no less and no more.

Eh, I liked the new tools I was given in seminary, but I still wanted more room to play around. If the Holy Scriptures were written not just to be an authority, but to be God's Word to you and me personally, I like the idea of allowing them to speak to us in just that way – with a background of tradition, but also with the wind of the Spirit blowing through us as we read, and interpret, and learn to apply what we understand to be true.

So for bringing this more kaleidoscopic lens to bear on our interpretation of scripture, there is no event more complicated, more intense, and more central to our lives of faith than the passion of Jesus. What does it mean for us to say that Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins? If Robert Frost's "Road Less Traveled" is the most familiar and most argued over piece of American poetry, which Google seems to say it is; then this tenant of Christianity must be the most familiar and most argued over statement about our faith. Jesus died to save us from sin. OK? If you've been around any Christian group, even just a little bit, you've heard that statement said as "truth." But what, in the world, does it mean? That's where it gets interesting for me. People act like they know. People claim that it's obvious. But as you can probably guess, I've gotten in a few arguments there as well. For me, the interesting bits lie in trying to figure out just how much you can take away from the event rather than assigning just one meaning to it for all times and purposes.

This passage alone evidences at least three relevant understandings of the atonement – which is the theological word to describe the action Jesus took by taking on the cross as a punishment he didn't deserve. An atonement is a compensation, a payment, a ransom, but it can also be a way of describing wholeness, the state of being “at-one” with God, the universe, and everything.

So let's start with the baseline, the one we may have heard most often, the one that gets proclaimed frequently as the “one right answer.” The cross was God's retribution, plain and simple, a punishment doled out for the heinous crimes committed by humankind. This argument for this answer developed out of the Reformation, so it probably sounds familiar to those of us who have hung around communities that come from those traditions – Presbyterian, Lutheran, and even their offshoots that eventually formed Baptist and Methodist camps.

Adherents of this meaning would nod along with Paul that Christ died for the ungodly. While we were sinners, Christ died for us. Justified by his blood, we have been saved by him from the wrath of God. This can all be found in Paul's writings, sort of. This is where translation is an interesting help. The formal title for this retributive way of thinking is the penal substitutionary theory of atonement. What it means is that Jesus was punished (penal), in our place (substitution), as a ransom (atonement) for sins committed by ALL of humankind both before and after his death. This one is bothersome for me in the way it portrays God as wrathful, because even in theories of retributive justice – which I also don't like, the punishment at least is designed to fit the crime, an eye for an eye so to speak. But in this case an innocent person is punished for EVERYONE else's misdeeds. Here is where translation comes in handy – at least a bit. Where we have been taught to read that Jesus died “for us” – meaning in our place – it doesn't say that so much. It means for our sakes. That at least softens the blow. And where it

talks about us being saved from the wrath “of God.” The “of God” isn’t really there. Paul says, we have been saved by Jesus from the wrath. Generic wrath. Whatever wrath there is to come.

This interpretation has gotten the “one right answer” stamp of approval in many so-called “evangelical” circles no matter which denominational brand they tend to stick to. Those who rely on this theory of retribution alone, remind us of the overwhelming power of God to smite us at any moment. Only Jesus stands in the way of that. And while that is indeed good news that Jesus advocates for us, it also allows for humankind to believe that they too can be punitive in their communities when it comes to sin. After all, God was willing to be punishing, abusively so, if you acknowledge that God sent his son to receive punishment instead of us. So, folks would argue, then wiping out sin must be good, right? Well, any of these retributive forms of justice tend to be fear-based rather than love-based. The proponents of this interpretation of the cross teach with the fear of hell more than blessings of heaven. Believing in Jesus is your only out, so to speak. If Jesus was sacrificed, for you and your awful sins, you might better try harder to not sin any more. And you better listen to your church and its leaders who hold this wrath of God in check on your behalf.

So how else might we look at the cross? Another way is to consider that the cross is a means of restoration. Jesus is not being punished in our place. Rather, he is the new Adam sent by God to be the reversal of the fall. Adam took us into a world of sin, Jesus gets us out of it. Jesus’ sacrificial love brings us back to God. Paul reflects on this as well when he says, “For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.” And, “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” We have inherited the sin of Adam, and can’t save ourselves on our own. Then, under Moses, we were not good

“keepers of the law” either. And yet, the cross creates a new covenant that restores our relationship with God so that the law is no longer the constant judge and monitor of our behavior. It goes smack against the Phariseism of Jesus’ day that was so nitpicky about the law. Death has lost its sting because Jesus transforms it, reconditions it, restores the right relationship with humankind that was creation’s original intent. The payment that Jesus makes therefore, is not a ransom in our place, but an offering to make a difference. Jesus says of himself that he’s laying down his life, no one is taking it from him. A willing “free gift,” as Paul calls it.

So how else might we look at the cross? I think all three of the words in my sermon title are plausible possibilities, and at times we need each story: the story of Retribution, of Restoration, and of Reconciliation. But as we humans often do, I have a favorite, and it’s this one. That the cross is a symbol of our reconciliation with God is sometimes hard to imagine, but it gives us so many possibilities. What if the atonement is not simply an exchange of sin and consequence, but an invitation for us to be at-one with God, united with God as Jesus was united with God. What if God is calling us not just back to Eden, but into real relationship as the sons and daughters of the Divine? Paul had the whole story of Jesus in mind as he wrote this not just the cross bit. He understood how Jesus was preaching and teaching a life of radical love for friend, neighbor, and enemy, and that this had a healing effect on many, many people. Jesus was already saving people from his very first human breath. Paul was persecuting Christians in his former life. He understood just how dangerous this Jesus guy was to the status quo. Being that he was a part of killing Jesus’ followers, don’t you think he knew the kind of hatred that hung Jesus on the cross to begin with?

Reconciliation puts a new spin on the cross. Jesus died to save us from our sin. How? Jesus took the very worst that humankind could dish out, and conquered it, rendered it

meaningless. He demonstrates with this act of sacrifice that the mercy of God is not only steadfast but it has no end. It is complete in love. It is felt in true justice. If you live a life of love, it will be difficult, if not impossible to get out of it without experiencing harm and persecution. In that way, the cross is a logical end to what human beings have the awful tendency to do to each other. Jesus knew this. God knew this. They persevered anyway because it would bring a message of reconciliation in both the spiritual and physical realms.

We can think of it this way. Retribution is most certainly an eye for an eye. We recognize this in our own justice system's policies of sentencing, many of which have their own downsides as to how fair they are or how fairly they are applied. Restoration is a return to the former ideal. The new Eden. We get a fresh start, a new beginning, but it seems to suggest that we might need an overhaul again at a later date. But Reconciliation is a complete reordering, a transformation of the relationship as it has been known. As Paul writes, "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. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." We are enemies no more.

Having a favored interpretation doesn't mean that I think it's the only valid one. Having listed these three possibilities does not make for an exhaustive list. The cross bears meaning because it continues to speak to us, to get told in new ways, to allow each facet to shed its light on particular people in particular situations. Do I believe that Jesus died to save me from my sins? Yes, oh yes I do, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you and I will mean the exact same things by answering that question in the affirmative. That's OK. In fact, by me, it is encouraged. The cross is good news. But it should take some work on our part to figure out why because on the surface it is absolutely horrible news. The execution of an innocent man being good news

should come as a shock, and it should leave us scratching our heads. If you take it to mean only that which confirms your own fears and prejudices, maybe it's worth asking what else it could be saying. If it doesn't leave you reeling with questions of justice and mercy and forgiveness and remorse, then it isn't really telling us much. But I dare say that the cross is the definitive symbol for me for pursuing exactly those questions, the big ones, the ones that make me question just what would I die for. How about you? Amen.