

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 6, 2022

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 | PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16 | ROMANS 10:8B-13
| LUKE 4:1-13

There's a show on PBS that you probably know called Ask This Old House. Ask This Old House is sort of like all the stuff HGTV edits out of Property Brothers. The premise of the show is that someone has a problem in their home that they're trying to fix. They have a faucet that doesn't work, they need insulate their windows, they want to install solar panels, etc. And the show's hosts come to the house and say, "Show me what the problem is and what you've tried to do so far." And the person will walk through all the things they've tried that didn't work, and in a thick Boston accent the host of the show will say something to the effect of *You're trying to do it without the right tool.*

For Lent this year, I'm going to try to help you build a theological toolbox. What are some tools that we have in the Lutheran tradition that can help us make the world a more intelligible and coherent place for us to live and serve in? And so every week, I'm going to give you one concept or idea that you can have ready to use when you have to do some theological work. And by the end of this Lent, you should have a nice little toolbox you can work with.

One quick caveat about this. The point of tools is to they help you do work in a different way. They let you apply more torque, more force, etc. so that you can do your project. Sometimes the tool just helps you get a better angle or start on whatever you're trying to do, but it doesn't do everything. You can't build a house with just a hammer. And it's the same with theological tools that we have. These don't solve or answer all of our problems immediately, but they can help clarify our thinking and help us make progress.

So the first tool that we're going to talk about this week is justification. That's what this weekend's reading from Romans is about. In the Lutheran tradition, we often say that we are "justified by faith" or "justified by grace."¹ And we probably have some idea what we mean by faith (trust) and what we mean by grace (giftedness). But what does it mean to be justified?

Well, one way to think of justification is as alignment. If you're making a poster for an event and you're inserting some text, you have to decide how you want to justify it, how you want to align it. Do you want it justified, aligned, on the left? The right? The center? Somewhere in between?

That's one way to think about justification theologically. We're not justified, or aligned correctly, to where God is. We should be here, but we're doing God knows

¹ In the Augsburg Confession, this is Article IV. See Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary* (Fortress Press, 1987), 58. There's a good summary of this in Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Martin Luther and Justification," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, August 31, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.336>.

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what over here, so God moves us over to the correct place. That's fine, if not a little legalistic and didactic, but whatever. You get the idea. When we're justified, we get lined up with God the right way.

Another way to think about justification, and this one might be more useful, is as giving evidence. When you justify something, you make the case for it. We justify actions. I was going over the speed limit *because everyone else was and driving the speed limit wouldn't have been safe*. We justify opinions. Restaurants shouldn't have smoking sections *because the smoke doesn't stay in the section*. And in some ways we justify ourselves. We give evidence for our own existence, identities, and futures.

Imagine for a minute that you are a high school student, and you decide that you want to go to college. You can't just show up on the first day of class. You need to apply. You need to justify your place there. You need to send them all your grades. You need to show them how you've served your community. You need to write them an essay about somehow you've overcome adversity. You need to send them a video of you playing tennis. You need to get letters from your teachers vouching for your smarts and a letter from a supervisor vouching for your work effort. You justify your place.

And in your head, you might be thinking *This application was a lot of work. Making my case, justifying my presence here is really difficult, and I can't wait to be done so I can get back to just living instead of constantly having to make the case for why I belong*.

Except for what? It's never really done. Sure, you don't fill out some bajillion page application for a while, but you're not going to lose that dull sense of insecurity about whether you've done enough. When you look for a job or an internship, you'll start marshalling evidence all over again. When you try to make friends, you might wonder if I'm doing enough to justify these people's friendship? If you're in a relationship, you'll be running that same thing in your head. What am I bringing to this person to keep this going? You might feel that same dynamic in your community. You might feel like you need to prove your capacity for belonging, feeling like you need to justify or explain your presence or validate your own existence.

When we say that we're justified by grace or faith, we're really saying that we don't need to justify or provide evidence or make the case for our own dignity and worth. You don't need to get approval. You don't need to apply. You don't need to make the case. When we say that we're justified by grace or faith, we mean that we don't have to gather evidence to prove that we're worthy of love. That's already said and done.

So how can we use that justification idea as a tool in our own lives? Well, let's start by thinking about ourselves and our own identities. For one, all that striving to justify ourselves has a kind of opportunity cost to it. It's time and energy that we could spend pursuing things that are enriching to ourselves and our communities

instead of just making us feel needed. The flipside of self-justification is self-absorption.

Because the problem with self-justification isn't so much that it's impossible to do. You can do it. The problem is that you have to keep doing it. Justifying your existence, your place, your worth isn't like pushing a boulder up a hill. Bear down and get it over with. It's sort of like walking with a pebble in your shoe. You can tough it out for a while, but it starts to really wear you down over time.

So one way that we can use justification in our lives is by asking what ends we're actually seeking in our life and work. When I start building a case, racking up evidence to justify my own position, we need to be clear about what we're trying to build a case for. To go back to that college application example, the thing that starts as an attempt to justify our position in a classroom can quickly become an attempt to justify our entire self. And when rejection comes, it won't just be a rejection of your application. It'll seem like a rejection of your whole person. And if you're passed that age, you can imagine the promotion, the relationship, the family thing, etc. here and get the same idea.

And we can apply that idea to our relationships with others as well. That just as our own relationship with God isn't contingent on our own achievements, the integrity of others is never dependent on our own perceptions of their worth or their ability to provide evidence that we find particularly impressive. When Dorothy Day remarked that the gospel takes away our ability to separate the deserving poor from the undeserving poor, this is what she was getting at. Our own notions of who is worthy or unworthy or deserving or undeserving turn out to be mostly just pointless at best and self-serving at worst.

In other words, other people don't have to justify their ability to be treated as Christ treats us. It doesn't matter whether we happen to like them or whether they make us feel good or whether we view them sympathetically or, to use Day's phrase, whether we find them deserving or not. When we say that someone is deserving of love or respect or consideration because of some particular attribute they have, everything after "because" is irrelevant. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God makes the case for them.

In his book on justification, the German theologian Oswald Bayer notes that it's not just one area for reflection, but that it "embraces the totality" of our life.² And if what I just outlined above made any sense at all, you can understand why. Justification asks us to begin not with our own perspectives, our own opinions, and our own agendas, but with the action of God in Christ. And as St. Paul puts it, no one whom God has justified will be "put to shame."

² Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Fortress Press, 2017), 9.

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