

Trinity United Methodist Church

September 8, 2019

“Back to School: Lessons from Kindergarten”

“Picture Day: Trying to Look Perfect When We Aren’t”

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Scripture: Romans 3:21-31

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So if you're like me, your Facebook feed was inundated this past week with first-day-of-school pictures, and everyone was looking great and fantastic, students and teachers alike. Our preschool gets started this week, and let me take just a moment to introduce our new preschool director, Sarah Moore. Would you stand? Sarah is our new Preschool Director, member here at Trinity, and she has been absolutely hitting the ground running, getting us off to a great school year. I'm very appreciative for all that she's doing for us, and for the Preschool Board as well, that has been helping her.

So with back-to-school season, I figured it was a good time to maybe return to some of the basics of faith through the back-to-school lens. And so today we're talking about Picture Day. Do you remember picture day as a kid? Maybe your mom or dad would dress you up in some outfit that you really didn't want to wear, but you did anyway, and you look back and you go, "Oh, my golly, what were they thinking?" But then there was the year that they let you pick out your outfit for yourself, and you look back and you go, "Oh, my golly, what was I thinking?" Like there was one year I wore a black jacket and a Chicago Bulls hat. I don't know, I thought it was cool, I guess.

But professional pictures, too, where we look back on them and go, "Oh, wow." So there's baby pics (screen shows unflattering baby photo; laughter from congregation)...that's from online. That's not my family. We have wedding pictures, which by the way, looking at the top corner there, if you Google "Awkward family photos," you'll have a lovely afternoon this afternoon. There are family pictures (screen showing series of photos). And then there's this guy...that's when I was four. And then...that's when I was in eighth grade...yeah. Mm-hmm. And then there's these folks (screen showing photo of Pastor's family).

So the thing about professional pictures, these posed professional pictures, if you remember going to these, they make you sit, the camera's there, sit like this, now turn this way, now crank your head this way and smile! You know, I don't ever remember when my mom lovingly placed her hand on my shoulder. Most of the time it was the backside—or, yeah, around my throat, yeah. But seriously, what mother reaches across the body and stays turned this way. It's just awkward, right?

And what germinated this was years ago, when Mark was an infant, he was born in September, and then in November my wife thought, "hey, we need to go get updated family pictures for Christmas," to give family presents at Christmas. All right, fine, whatever. So we go to JC Penney's or Sears or whatever it was and we're in that awkward pose and we sat there for what felt like forever because the photographer was trying to get the *newborn to look at the camera*. And finally after about 15 minutes, I'm like, "it's a baby, he's not going to look. Just take the picture!" So I posted about it on Facebook afterwards and a clergy friend commented. He said, "That'll preach." How when we do these pictures like this, we try to *look* perfect when we are far from it.

And social media just perpetuates that today. In fact, psychologists are now studying this phenomenon and the impact that it has, especially on young people, where whatever you're on, Facebook or Instagram or Twitter or whatever, if you think about it, you post the nice family pictures. Right? You don't post, typically, a selfie of when you first get up in the morning, with your hair all a mess and your makeup all out of whack or not even on or whatever. Certainly not before coffee. At least you might post a picture of your coffee cup and your Bible beside it. You know, "Devotions!" But you don't post a picture of yourself that early in the morning. You wait until you've got it together. Or you

post a picture of the cute kid or the grandkid or the cute cat or whatever. We put out there a better life than the everyday moments that we're actually living, don't we? But people see that and they think, "Oh, I want that." FOMO, fear of missing out, right? And it plays into our psychology in many negative ways today. Because the reality is that we're not perfect. Half the time, sometimes, we're not even good, right? But we're certainly not perfect.

There's other ways we try to be perfect, but we're not. Oftentimes, and this is well before pictures even existed, we try to come across as perfect in our behavior. We try to put on a certain mask, façade in our behavior, where we project this image, maybe this person that we try to be, but really we aren't down inside. Oftentimes we think we're perfect in our opinions and that others are decidedly wrong in their opinions that they think are perfect. And even in our lives of faith and the way that we approach our faith and our spirituality. We often put on this façade that we're better than we are, that we're more perfect, maybe, than we actually are.

It's a debate that has gone on since practically the beginning of time, and certainly in the early church that we see in the book of Romans. I was trying to follow along with the scripture reading, and I'm reminded: Romans can be a hard book to read. Paul often writes in circles in Romans. He gets a little technical about faith. And you can get a little lost in Romans.

But basically what Paul is talking about is this debate between the Jewish Christians—those people who were Jewish, like Jesus, who accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, so they started to follow Jesus and therefore became Christian as well. And then the Gentile Christians, those who were Greeks and other folks outside of the Jewish faith, who accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and began to follow him as well.

The debate was, as Christianity grew out of Judaism, remember Judaism had all these rules. All these laws from way back in the Old Testament, our Old Testament, the law of Moses. Things about what you should eat and what you shouldn't eat. How you should dress, how you shouldn't dress. What you're supposed to do and not do and so forth and so on. Over six hundred and some of these laws for living day in and day out. And so the debate was, as believers now in Jesus, did they still have to follow all of those laws, or did they not have to?

So part of that debate is, well, did the law do what it was supposed to do, anyway? Because basically as God formed His people, the children of Israel, He gave them these laws to help them live holy. The whole point of Leviticus is summarized in one verse: "Be holy as I am holy." Well, how do we do that, God? Here you go. Here's the law.

And so many of those laws, if you go back and read through them, they sound really archaic to us. Some of them sound flat-out weird to us. And remember that most

of those laws were given because whatever it says don't do, that's what was going on in the cultures surrounding them. Whatever it says to do, that's *not* what was happening in the culture around them. So therefore it was designed as "hey, be different as God is different. Be holy and set apart as God is holy." That was the intent of the law, and Paul recognizes that.

But do we follow every law in our society today? Right? Speed limits? Stop signs? You know, **Slide Tires On Pavement**, right? We don't necessarily follow to the "T" every single law in our society today. And similarly with this Jewish law, it became burdensome for many people. But at the same time, some people got so, "I'm a rule follower, and I'm a law follower, and therefore I'm perfect because I follow all these rules." Some of y'all know people like that. And that was the way some people were as well.

So that's this whole debate. What's this law for to begin with? And if we don't follow every letter of the law, then what's the point of it anyway? These Jewish Christians were under the belief that following that law is what made them perfect in the sight of God. Righteous. But this is where we get Romans 3:23, a famous passage of scripture, that a lot of times we quote as a caveat, maybe, but it's also truth: "That for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Not one of us is perfect, Paul says. And there is no way that we can ever be perfect on our own. There is nothing that we can do, Paul goes on to say as he does in his letters, to earn our way into heaven. There's nothing we can do to earn our salvation.

The Jews thought they had it as was given to them in the law through the sacrifice system, the sacrificial system, where they presented these sacrifices and God would receive these sacrifices and be appeased, and the people would be forgiven through these sacrifices. But they had to do it over and over and over and over again. Why? Because they weren't perfect. That was the whole point of the sacrifice system to begin with. But they thought that doing all of these and more was what made them perfect. So it's like they were trying to get that pose just right before God – "I really am holy, I promise" – when really they weren't.

Instead, Paul says people are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life once and for all. You want to talk about the most perfect pose, it could very well be the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross as the perfect pose indeed. We are made perfect in the love of Christ, and we call that grace.

But the temptation doesn't stop, does it? We can still choose to sin, and pride is one of the biggest sins there is. In fact, it's one which Jesus seemed to confront the most. Especially the idea that "I don't need God. I'm good enough the way I am." Jesus pointed this out when he observed a Pharisee and a tax collector at the temple. And if you remember that story, the tax collector beat his breast, "Lord, have mercy on me, for

I am a sinner.” He was very contrite, he was very humble. But it was the Pharisee that stood literally at the distance of judgment, who pointed the finger of judgment and said, “God, I thank you that I’m not like *that* guy,” or woman, or whatever the case might be. When we find ourselves doing that, it’s like thinking that *our* school pictures are awesome, when in reality, go back and look. It’s convenient to forget who we were, especially who we were before believing fully in Jesus.

But the flip side of the coin, then, is, like I said, sometimes we use that “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” as a caveat. “Well, hey, everyone’s a sinner, so I don’t have to try as hard. I can just go on in life how I want to, ‘cause nobody’s perfect, and I’m surely not.” But when we realize that we’re not perfect, it doesn’t mean that we give up trying. It doesn’t mean that we give up trying to live how God would have us to live. In fact, Paul ends this section by saying, so therefore, if we believe in Jesus, does it nullify that whole law? Does it cancel out all that Old Testament stuff for us? It doesn’t, Paul says, but rather, it fulfills it. Why? Because remember the intent of that law. What was its purpose? To make us holy, as God is holy. And who ultimately did that for us? Jesus. So Jesus fulfills all of that law, and living with Jesus in us and Jesus living through us is what fulfills the intent of that law.

There’s a new style of picture-taking, professional picture-taking that has happened since several years ago, ten years ago almost. Instead of going to the portrait studios – in fact, I think most of them are about closed up these days. Instead, even folks that started out as amateur photographers have become professional photographers, especially Photoshop and things like that. And some of y’all, I’ve seen your pictures, you’ve participated in these types of photo shoots, and we did last Fall. It was so much more relaxing. We just went out and walked around a battlefield in Yorktown for a little bit, and the photographer was just snapping away as we were just interacting as a family. And yes, there was a little of “all right, sit on this little rustic fence, sit beside each other and look at each other like you love each other.” And, “Mark, behave,” and “Chloe, smile,” and things like that. But it was so much more relaxing because it captured us as we are as a family without that awkwardness. It was candid. And indeed, as this has taken off, these pictures are so much better than Awkward Family Photos. Right? Because they’re candid, and they capture us as we are.

So what if we were more candid in our faith? What if we were more candid in our confessions before God? God knows it all anyway; why do we try to put on a front with God? Why don’t we just say we’re sorry, please forgive us, with whatever it is? What if we were more candid with our questions about faith? Some of us think that we can’t question faith, that we can’t especially question God, when nothing could be further from the truth. God can handle it. And it’s only in questioning that we grow to begin with. Further down that line, what if we even got candid about our doubts that we might have from time to time?

That's when the importance of small groups of Sunday School, Bible study and church comes in. Really getting to know each other as a church and let ourselves be known. That's part of it, too, not just waiting on others to come to us, but to open up ourselves as well. Instead of, "Hey, how are you?" "Good, I'm fine, how are you?", when really somebody might be going through stuff.

Wesley had his small groups ask the question, "How is it with your soul today?" A friend of mine, Kevin Watson, contemporizes that by saying, "How are you doing, *really?*" Of course, then we've got to be willing to listen to each other, right?

And certainly to get away from – we Christians, we've got a fabulous pattern of criticizing others when they aren't perfect, like we think they should be perfect. Whatever it is. And maybe we can get away from that and extend the grace and love that we have received through Jesus both to others and to ourselves. To realize that, "I don't have to put on this air. I don't have to put on this awkward pose in life that I find miserable. I can be me as God created me," and extend that same grace and forgiveness to ourselves and each other. For indeed, none of us are perfect save for the only One who is, Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.