

Justified by Faith
By Rev Todd Farnsworth
Galatians 2: 11-21



11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. **12** For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. **13** The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. **14** When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? **15** “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles **16** know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in[a] Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. **17** “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! **18** If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. **19** “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. **20** I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. **21** I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”[b]

There are a couple of things that we all share in common and on Mother’s Day we celebrate at least one of those things. We all were born. In some sense, some way, we all came into the world. Here’s a picture of a handsome young fellow, fairly fresh into his time on this earth.



I like his haircut. Nice smile. Looks a little confused. Who knows, he might grow out of that! As he looks at the camera he has no idea that when he turns 58 he will be sitting on the cusp of a world pandemic. He can't imagine that he'll be living out that pandemic in the state of NY (how could he, he's just a baby!) or that as the pandemic shifts a little bit, he'll be preaching outdoors and via zoom to a lovely congregation.

The second thing we share in common is that we all had a birth mother.

Let's see that next picture.



The woman who birthed us in some fashion into this world and who may or may not have been able to stay around to watch us grow up. Our birth mother may be different from our Mother. Our Mother is (usually, though not always) a woman, who cared for us, protected us, taught us, loved us through our good times and our ugly times. No matter what was going on, she was there for us. This is a picture of my Mother. Her name is Olive. She was not my birth mother. Nonetheless, as my mother, she loved me and she knew how to get under my skin! With a certain look or a particular tone of voice, I was pretty sure if I had crossed a line or somehow disappointed her. I also got the idea if she was proud of me, or worried about me. Mother-child relationships can be complicated no matter how old we are.

I bring up the *complication* part because, as much as I knew Olive loved me, I also knew that I wanted to keep her loving me. I would do pretty much anything to not get that “what do you think you’re doing?” look or that “I can’t believe you did that” edge in her voice. And so I’d do a little dance, keep up appearances. I tried to anticipate what it was that would keep her happy. I’d choose my words carefully. Time my gestures. Make sure I made enough eye contact to let her know I cared.

I’m not sure I was always successful in my dance routine. In fact, every time we took leave of her, I was sure she wanted us to stay longer...my words and my feet became clumsy. Instead of 1-2-3-dip, 1-2-3-twirl, I would stagger and slur and concede to one more cup of coffee or maybe a game of BINGO and in the end...it would never be enough. She’d be disappointed that I was going. She’d be sad that we couldn’t...wouldn’t...stay just a little bit longer.

Maybe you had a similar experience with someone who was or is Mom to you. It’s can be complicated...right? Because there is this bond between you.

Anyway, today’s text from Paul’s letter to the Galatians reminds me of this predicament. If the story sounds familiar it’s because it is familiar. We heard the same issue being debated last Sunday. It was a recurring theme in the early church and Paul makes a similar case. He says:

*“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles **16** know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in[a] Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*

The people in the early church who had come to Jesus by way of Moses and the prophets and circumcision believed that the only way that they could be right with God was to follow those dance steps. They had to learn the rules and pay attention to the music that was playing. For anyone who has read even a little of the Old Testament you know, that's a lot of rules. Written rules and unwritten rules. There was a lot of room for disappointing our deity who just wanted us to stay a little longer...there was a lot of focus on doing the dance right.

*We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles...*the commentators believe that Paul is speaking with his tongue somewhat lodged in his cheek. He is poking at the erroneous understanding of us and them, and he is proclaiming that those who have been claimed by Jesus, who have received his Spirit and have found salvation therein, understand that the expectations of pleasing God in order to be loved are not how Christianity works. Paul is describing an evolution of thought to a people who are yearning to be loved. Like the little boy at the top of your bulletins (and some of you), the Galatians were trying to do things correctly to please their Mother Lord in order to receive the pats on the head or the keys to the realm of God that they perceived were the reward. They didn't want to let God down.

Paul proclaims to all of us who long for a healthy relationship, a lasting communion with God that, *a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.* That word **"justified"** is a great word. It works in the past, the present, and in the future. It is an eternal word that speaks to an eternal kinship, and an eternal bond of love, that is not dependent on

what we do. Justified is an eternal word that is dependent on *who God is*...no dance lessons necessary.

Paul asserts that we can be distracted by the rules of the dance and lose sight of our partner if we believe that our relationship is based on following a chart.

I believe that is what happened with Olive, and I regret it. Instead of just enjoying the time we had together I was often consumed with this tango of terror I had created. Looking back, I'm not sure Olive cared much about my well-rehearsed moves. She might have even been confused by them. **She just loved me.** She enjoyed my company. She liked to laugh and listen to my stories. She could share her occasional worries and hopes with me. We held in common a sacred time and important values. That was enough for Olive.

Reflecting on this text, I think that she genuinely felt sad when I would leave, because we had such a good time when we were together. But instead of just holding out my hand and allowing her to lead in love (when we were together or apart) I would get anxious and grumpy and I fretted away a lot of our time together, focused on stuff that was not really all that vital.

Paul didn't want the Galatians to fret away their time spent with God. He wanted them to keep their eyes on the One who was most essential to their lives and living. He was hopeful that they would learn to hold out their hands and receive the love that God had to offer. It didn't have to be as complicated as Cephas was indicating. Cephas knew better. He was enjoying the fruits of how Jesus had taught them to dance with the Lord.

Cephas was also imposing a bunch of superfluous requirements onto people who were seeking a closer relationship with the Holy. Paul calls him out. *You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?*

Paul was reminding Cephas...and the Galatians, that our relationship with God is bigger than the steps we've learned or practice. The "justification" they sought wasn't contingent on what they did...God already loved them. *God already loves us.* God already loves us. I think that's important to remember today...or any day where we find ourselves twisting and turning to do "the right thing" for somebody else's approval. God already loves us. We only need to hold out our hand, and Love will lead.

It's Mother's day and even though my mother, Olive, died a few years ago, Paul's message brings me peace as I reflect on the wonderful times Olive and I spent together. As I focus on the love we shared while eating greasy cheeseburgers in my car and watching her play dolls with Callie on the floor of our living room; and the joy in Olive's twinkly blue eyes as she held Sam Stephen Farnsworth (named after Olive's son, Steve), for the very first time. I can hear Olive's voice now saying, "The best things in life aren't things," in her wonderful voice. I can feel her holding me, and me holding her back...and I am justified by faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I pray that tender peace for you.

Amen.