Justifying Grace - Rev. Kristin Santiago, November 16, 2012

The subway station was full of people coming and going that weekday morning. Most people were on their way to work, to school, taking children to daycare, rushing to meetings, trying to make time to grab a cup of coffee and to catch the train in the subway Metro station in Washington D.C. The station was busy, and full. In one corner of the station, near the entrance doors, stood one man, dressed in jeans, a jacket and a baseball cap. He played the violin with all his heart, skillfully and beautifully, as person by person rushed by on their way to somewhere, something, most of them in a hurry.

At one point a little child whose mother was taking him to the babysitter on her way to work, stopped in front of the violinist, mesmerized by the beauty of the sound. His mother rushed onward, and then turned back when she realized the child was no longer in tow, and tugged at his hand, gently but firmly pulling him away. The child went along with his mother, looking back at the violinist for as long as he could to watch and listen, soaking the music into his soul until it became absolutely unforgettable.

The violinist continued to play whether or not anyone stopped, for his mission was to share the music. Occasionally, someone walked through the subway entrance doors and heard the sound and stopped to listen, to be present in that moment and really notice the beauty of it. Once caught by the sound, it was difficult to go on without it echoing in their hearts and memories. It was stunning, it changed how they saw and heard everything else that day.

Little did the passersby realize that the man serenading them on his beloved violin was a master musician who had played a sold-out concert just the night before, where even the least costly seats were over $100. But now, clad in blue jeans and baseball cap, he offered them priceless beauty, a shere gift of wonder, joy, and love, his agape, even if many did not stop to listen, he played on unhindered… for them.

**My name is Kristin Santiago, and the title of this talk is Justifying Grace.**

**Justifying Grace tells the story of how a person accepts the relationship that of unconditional love and grace that God offers us. This relationship of unconditional love and grace has always been initiated first by God. In the beginning** when God created[\*](javascript:void(0);) the heavens and the earth,2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[\*](javascript:void(0);) swept over the face of the waters.3Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.4And God saw that the light was good.

God created and blessed all creation as good. God blessed people too. But then, there is something in us that ever since we had a choice, has made wrong choices and rebels against what God has desired for our well being. We continue to make wrong choices that separate us from God and diminish our spiritual lives. Oftentimes, we make those wrong choices because we are trying substitute something or someone, even ourselves in place of God. These wrong choices separate us from God. Anytime we try to substitute that which is not-god, for God, we are making a wrong choice, we are wandering away the truth about who God is and who we are. But God’s love and grace are greater than all our wrong choices. God created us to live in God’s image, to have a living relationship with God. Nothing else can satisfy our desire for that living relationship with God, no other person, no other thing, nothing can replace our soul’s deepest desire to live in relationship with God. A Christian by the name of Augustine said this about our true desire, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You, O Lord”.

**So the central theme of the Bible is the story of God calling us back into the relationship for which we were created. The story of Justifying Grace is the story of how God in Jesus Christ has come to call us back to accept the relationship God offers us.**  God offers us a personal relationship of self-giving love, not a system of rules and regulations. Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus uses the image of a yoke that is placed around a team of oxen to guide them. However, he teaches us that his yoke is unlike the oxen yoke, because it is not burdensome, not heavy, not given to oppress but rather, given to lift us up and help us realize and accept that God wants a relationship with us built out of God’s love and grace. This is very different than a burdensome list of rules.

**Justifying grace is at work in us the moment we say yes to the relationship God offers us in Christ. Our acceptance changes everything.** One illustration of this is given by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, Luke 15. In this parable Justifying Grace is evident in the prodigal’s turning away from his misery and returning home. The prodigal expects to have to explain himself to his Father and earn his way back into relationship with his Father. However, what actually happens is that the Father sees the wayward son returning home, even though that son is still far away, the Father runs to his son and welcomes him with open arms. The son does not earn his way back to the Father, rather the Father runs to welcome the son. This is how God relates to us. God knows and loves us better than we love ourselves.

**Our responding to God’s grace is an act of faith.** We cannot do anything to earn or merit a relationship with God. Salvation is instantaneous and continuous. I was, I am, and I will be saved by grace. In scripture, the spiritual experience of justifying grace is also known as salvation, conversion, having one’s sins forgiven and being born again.

For me, the awareness that I could not do anything to merit God’s love, was something that was revealed to me over time, not all of a sudden. Over time, I was introduced to God, whose love is gentle, healing, and provides rest for weary children. As a young child of 8 years old, I had a painful experience at a Vacation Bible School that I visited with a childhood friend. There, for the first time, I was told stories about an angry god who would readily punish sinners. I was 8. I was a child. At the same time, my father was beginning to succumb to the progression of alcoholism and what resulted was increased violence in our home. Combining the angry dad with the stories of an angry God, just about broke my heart to bits. For several years I struggled with the depiction of such an angry and unmerciful god that was shared at that Bible School with all of us children. I felt quite lost and alone and searched for answers as best I could by getting involved with a different church where I had been invited to sing with a children’s choir. The women who directed the children’s choir were very kind. If my parents would not take me to choir practice, the leaders gave me a ride. Once during practice, the choir director, began to read Matthew 11:28; which I mentioned to you earlier. “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest”. It was a balm to my soul. Jesus’ words of comfort and rest were music to my soul. After she read that verse, the choir director began to tell us, “Children, Jesus loves you so very much. His arms are open to you so that you know you can always come to him and he will love you, no matter what”. At that moment, I began to hope. In my mind’s eye, I could see Jesus as she described him, arms open to welcome all who are weary. Although I was only 11 or so, I understood weary. I had seen a lot in my life, and for the first time, I was now seeing a love that would find even me and never leave me to face the world alone. I was much like the little child in the subway station, hearing music that could never be forgotten, the truth of God’s lavish, gentle, sweet love for all who labor and are heavy-laden, truth that heals the soul.

**Justifying Grace is fully revealed to us in the cross of Jesus Christ.** It is there that our relationship with God is restored because it is there that we are shown how great is God’s love and forgiveness. “For 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.” (Romans 5:6-8). God in Christ our Lord reaches out to us from the cross with full pardon and love.

Jesus’ love and forgiveness shown to us on the cross, restores our relationship to God, and our relationship to other people. +

**Conversion continues as we say yes to Jesus every day and** seek to understand ourselves better, acknowledge our need for Christ, seek God's will in our lives, practice essential spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible-reading, meditation, obedience to the conversion of our will to God’s . We do not do these things to earn God’s favor, but in a grateful response to the grace and love shown to us especially from the cross.

**Justifying grace is a double acceptance.** By that we mean that there is a two-way yes. 1. God said yes to us in creation, and at the cross.2.We say yes to the relationship God offers in Jesus. God addresses our intellect, we respond in faith

Faith is a reasonable response to God's self-revelation (Rom. 12:1-2, Eph. 4:17-24).

God appeals to our free will by grace, and we are free to choose. We are free to accept or reject the offer, as an act of our will. Faith is an act of trust and self-denial; we take up the cross and follow a crucified Lord. (Matt. 16:24-26)

**God touches our hearts. We respond with love and enthusiasm.**  God calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Saving faith is the foundation of good works, not the result, “If you love me, you will keep[\*](javascript:void(0);) my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,[\*](javascript:void(0);) to be with you forever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in[\*](javascript:void(0);) you “. (John 14: 15-17)

God loves you first and most, always. Your choice is to respond. To accept the most precious gift of all, God’s love, and let God’s love take over your mind, your will, your heart, your actions.

I saw a Christian explain Justifying Grace like this: it is just as if you’d never sinned.

God pardons you, loves you freely, runs down the road to catch you in open arms. How much God wants to bless you and set you free to be a blessing to others. Like the Master Musician who serenades us with the most beautiful truth, the song of God’s own heart calling out to you, saying “Come home”, come to me and know I love you more than you could ever imagine.

**One aspect of prevenient grace moving us to justifying grace is other Christian's loving acts. Known as agape**, the greek word for unconditional love, which is always a gift, not merited, not earned. You are experiencing agape as you sit here this weekend. An example of the Emmaus community giving agape love are these letters.

You are surrounded by the agape of your brothers and sisters in Christ, so that you can experience first-hand, in a real way, the loving truth of how God relates to all and to each of us.