

Ahead and Behind

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Romans 5:1–8

Many years ago, when I was a senior in high school, I had an acquaintance who was a very fine bicyclist. Brian (I think that was his name) was such a strong and accomplished bicyclist that for his week as a camper at Camp Fowler he would ride his bike there, all the way from Clifton Park, more than 80 miles. In case you didn't know, on the way out to camp much of that ride is uphill.

I'm pretty certain Brian would ask someone else driving that way to take his luggage there by car. He wasn't carrying a full pack and sleeping bag.

But still ... wow!

Anyway, I did a fair amount of biking back then, not as much as Brian did, certainly none of that crazy biking-to-Fowler stuff, but I did have some experience and some skill. So, Brian asked me to help him out for a bike ride he was leading. He was going to be the lead marshal for this ride, and he needed someone to help him do that, to be co-marshal, or assistant marshal.

In this ride that I helped marshal, most who participated were younger than me and not too experienced. Sure, there was some variety, in strength and skill. But they were not experts. Perhaps some of them didn't feel that they really deserved to be there. But Brian and I, we were glad to have them, all of them. And we knew that having marshals to lead and encourage them and help them stay safe was a really good thing.

What marshals do in these rides is keep the group together and safe. One of the marshals rides at the front, setting the pace, being alert to obstacles up ahead and letting those behind know about them, as well as setting a good example for safe bicycling on roadways. The other marshal rides at the back of the line, offering encouragement to those riding, making sure no one gets left behind, being alert to cars approaching the group from the rear, and kindly (yet firmly) maintaining safety on the road.

Now, Brian was a great bicyclist. But there's no way he could do all that was needed from the marshals. He could *either* be in the front *or* in the back. He could either lead the way or follow up from behind. But he sure couldn't do both at the very same time. Yet both functions were needed. The riders, for their safety and enjoyment, needed a guide and pacesetter, as well as a sentry and cheerleader.

Only someone truly special could be, at the same time, both ahead and behind.

But surely there's no one who can do *that*. Right?



Well, maybe you can tell that I'm not really talking about bike riding anymore. I don't want to stretch the metaphor too far. But here we go

Jesus is our marshal. He alone.
He is in front:

setting the pace,
guiding the way,
helping us with the obstacles and hazards along our journey.

And he is behind us:

encouraging us,
warning us,
correcting us,
making sure we don't get lost or left behind.

He is all that, can do all that, because he is the Lord, the only Son of the eternal Father. He is our marshal, our savior, our guide. And it is he who has welcomed us into this great bike ride he marshals.

We didn't sign up for it. We didn't compete for a spot, gaining entry only by winning some contest. We didn't pass some test.

My friend and colleague Tim Ten Clay (some of you might remember him from Pultneyville Reformed Church), he's been on a few of the annual RAGBRAI events, which is this massive week long bike ride all the way across the state of Iowa. He hopes to go again this July, while he and his family are on "home assignment" or "furlough" from their mission work in Italy.

Every time he does it, Tim really enjoys RAGBRAI. Yet it might not be quite so fitness-oriented as you would expect. Because, as Tim tells me, what typically happens is that you bike ten or twenty miles to some little town, where they have all sorts of goodies laid out for you: donuts and pies and corn dogs. How can you resist? Hey, you've been biking! Got to get fueled for the ride. Satisfied, and maybe a bit full, you then get on your bike and ride to the next town, where more treats await you. And so it goes, all the way across Iowa.

Tim says that he gained eight pounds on his last RAGBRAI.

Anyway, the RAGBRAI organizers use a lottery to determine who will be allowed entry to the ride. You submit an application on time, and then you wait to find out if you have won a spot in RAGBRAI.

For our ride with Jesus, there is no lottery, no contest. Nothing we have done has placed us into what Jesus guides and shepherds, what he tends and teaches.

The Apostle Paul talks about this, in the Bible passage I read. He uses a word that, while not exactly rare, is not often used by people these days, and when it is, I'm not sure they mean the same thing as what Paul means. "Justified" is that word. These days, when someone says they're justified, they usually mean that they were right to do something, or that they *had* a right to do it, and they say that maybe because someone is or might be questioning whether they should have done it. But Paul, when *he* uses the word "justified," he means something a bit different.

"[S]ince we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

When Paul talks here about being justified, he has in mind something so simple, yet so deep. He means *being in a right relationship with God*. He means being right with God.

But the problem is, we can't. We can't be in a right relationship with God. Not on our own. Not by what we do.

God is God, and we are not. God has made us; we didn't make God. Because we are creatures and God creates, it takes God to begin a relationship between us and God, one that is pure and simple and beautiful and good.

Yet the simple reality is that we have broken that relationship. From the beginnings of human history, the story again and again has been the same:

people would rather not be close to God,
rather not trust God,
rather not follow God,
rather not walk with God,
rather not obey God.

Just looking around us, just looking *within* us, should be enough to show that, of all the affirmations of the Christian faith, the most obvious and demonstrable is the one saying that we are broken and in our brokenness we have broken trust with God, broken relationship with God.

The irony in this — or is it tragedy? — is that we cannot be complete without being in relationship with God. Not only that, we yearn for

this completeness,
this purity,
this truth,
this holiness,
this glory,
this peace;

and yet we continually flee from it and sabotage it. And in our rebellion, we dig ourselves into a hole that none of us can on our own escape. There is no way for us, under our own power, to crawl out of the hole so we may stand alongside God made right, stand in God's presence justified.

So none of us can create that right relationship with God, and none of us can repair it. We cannot be justified, not on our own power.

But God does not let our rebellion stand. God does not let our "no" have the last word. God does not let our inability to make things right with God be the end of the story.

Jesus is the continuation of the story. Jesus completes the story. Jesus is God's "Yes" to our "no." By his death and his resurrection

he sets things right,
crosses the boundary,
knocks down the walls,
and disarms us who were his enemies.

And all that is left for us to do is to accept his loving death and his undying love.

All this happened while we were unable to do anything. "While we were weak," Paul says, "at the right time," meaning at that *very* time *in our weakness*, "Christ died for the ungodly."

This is God's proof of divine love for us and proof of our being now in right relationship with God: "that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

It wasn't when we were good.
It wasn't when we were strong.
It wasn't when we had done a lot of moral stuff.
It wasn't when we had built up enough brownie points.
Christ died for us

before all that,
before there was any possibility for that,
before we had any capacity for that.



There is such compassion here.

Can't you sense it? Can't you feel it?

There is compassion for those (maybe you're one of them) who feel even now such weakness within themselves, who by themselves feel so *un*-justified, yet yearn for the comfort, and indeed are comforted by the assurance that all making-things-right has been done by Jesus, and continues to be enough.

And that gospel compassion, I believe, is supposed to soften our hearts, toward ourselves to be sure, and truly, absolutely, toward others.

Yet the scandal of the church so often has been that we are grudging in showing compassion toward ourselves, leading us to be downright miserly with compassion toward others.

Too many of us harbor unresolved guilt and unsettled turmoil about hidden (or not so hidden) sins of our own. We find it difficult to forgive ourselves, forgetting or ignoring or denying that Jesus by his death and resurrection has made things right. Discounting his love, we find it hard to love ourselves. Setting aside his forgiveness, we struggle to forgive ourselves.

What often happens from such self-directed hardness of heart is that we project our self-hatred and our guilt-complexes onto others. And then, we pile requirements and conditions upon them, loading them up with burdens they cannot meet nor should have to.

That's right. They shouldn't have to. Not to be part of the beloved community of the Lord Jesus. Not to be welcomed by us. Not to be loved by us. Not to be part of our ongoing work of Spirit-led mission and service in the name of Jesus, the Lamb who was slain and now reigns.

We are, as Paul puts it, "justified by *faith*."

Not "justified by doing good deeds."
Not "justified by avoiding *bad* deeds."
Not "justified by kindness."
Not "justified by voting the right way."
Not "justified by smelling nice."
Not "justified by dressing right."
Not "justified by being employed."
Not "justified by being happily married."
Not "justified by a conventional sexual orientation."

No. It's justified *by faith*. What gets us into God's good graces is the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot, must not, surely better not be adding anything else to that.

Really, I sometimes get the impression that Christians together can be like some bike ride,

and some riders are struggling to keep up,
and some have ugly bikes,
and some forgot to put on the team jersey,
and some are a bit too excited,

so others start complaining about them. "Why are *they* here? They don't belong. Why don't they just drop out so we can finish this race in style?"

But the one marshal, Jesus Christ,

who rides ahead and behind,
whose work is in the past yet also comes to us from out of the future,

adjusts the pace and encourages the faltering and welcomes all, and, blessedly, often comes alongside a rider, placing a strong hand on the back of the struggling rider's seat, to add his strength and help the rider along.



My friends, grasp hold of the grace and forgiveness, the holiness and love, of the Lord Jesus, in whom you will know blessing and peace. And as forgiven and blessed people of Christ, have compassion toward yourselves and toward others.

Do all this for the sake of Jesus, who with the Father and the Spirit is to be worshiped and glorified and adored.