

We have before us (on the bulletin cover)
a mere five verses.

But they are from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans is pretty dense. Slow-going.

"Therefore, since we are justified ..."

I called the preacher assistance hotline
to get some help.

"Please listen carefully

because the menu options have changed. . . ."

"Press 1 for assistance with Greek.

"Press 2 to hear an English translation.

"Press Star to return to the Main Menu.

"Press Zero to pray to God."

I pressed 1 to get some help with the Greek word
translated "justification," "di-kai-oh- THAIN-tais."

Di-kai-oh- THAIN-tais means
to receive justice, to be vindicated,
to be freed of charges.

"Therefore, since we are freed of charges ...
because of faith ... we have **peace** with God."

What's peace mean, exactly?

I pressed 1: Peace, hi-RAIN-ayn, means
harmony in a personal relationship.

As in John 14:27, Jesus says,

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

So far, verse 1 literally translated says,
Therefore, since we are freed of charges
because of faith, we have harmony
in a personal relationship with God
through our Lord Jesus Christ ...

I resisted the temptation to press Zero just yet.

"... through whom we have obtained **access** ..."

Hmm.

Press 1. The Greek for access (pro-sah-GOHN-yay)
is a rare word in the Bible,

used by Paul to mean by open invitation,
or Without Further Introduction ...

"Access to this **grace** (KAH-rees),
meaning favor, goodwill, in which we stand.

I think what this means is, Jesus clears the way
between the faithful and God.

The first two verses in smooth translation read:
Without Further Introduction,
just because of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord,
we stand in harmonious personal relationship
with God, freed of all charges.

That sounds like pretty good news to me.

The 50-cent term for this idea is "justification."

The Reformed tradition seeks to connect
what God does for us

relative to what God asks of us,

through the doctrine of "justification."

How would you answer the point-blank question,
Are you a Christian?

Reformed theologian Mr. Shirley Guthrie, Jr.,
describes possible answers, all of them difficult:

a. "I am a Christian because I belong to a church."

But church membership is no sign
that I take seriously the Christian faith.

b. "I am a Christian because I profess Jesus Christ
as my personal Lord and Savior."

But my lived life is hardly worthy of Christ.

c. "I am not Christ, but I try to be Christ-like."

But how hard do I try? Does my Christian Fitbit
keep a running total of my faith-steps –
when I pray, read scripture, and worship?

The better answer, the Reformed answer is,
We cannot declare ourselves Christian.

We are justified (or made right with God)
not by our own efforts but by God's grace
in coming to the world in Jesus of Nazareth.

When we acknowledge our sinful depravity,
we discover that salvation is a gift of grace,
accepted by faith.

There's a parallel to justification
in the world of consumer finance.

In our consumer society, we use charge accounts
and memberships to gain standing.

A membership in BJ's or Costco
is a commercial form of justification, that is,
our worthiness to receive privileges and access
that we wouldn't otherwise enjoy.

When I used to fly on business,
 I had a United Airlines Red Carpet card,
 which justified me at private lounges at airports.
 Another parallel to justification would be
 professional requirements for education.
 Continuing education is a practice adopted
 by many membership organizations.
 To continue to practice law, or medicine,
 or engineering “Without Further Introduction,”
 a professional must engage in lifelong learning.
 Then there’s the justification
 of the Englishman who brought along
 his Rolls-Royce for an extended stay in the U.S.
 While he was at a resort far removed from any city,
 he suffered a mechanical failure of some sort.
 So he rang up his dealership back home
 and described the problem.
 Within 48 hours, Rolls-Royce flew a mechanic
 from England to the resort,
 with parts for the repair. After testing the car,
 the mechanic packed up and went back home.
 Justification means that the Englishman
 needed no further introduction
 other than that he owned a Rolls-Royce
 and it was broken.
 That was sufficient for Rolls to honor
 the lifetime guarantee of reliability.
 For those of us who aren’t justified
 by professional memberships
 or credit cards or high-status possessions,
 we are justified still by faith.
 Without Further Introduction,
 just because of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord,
 we stand in harmonious personal relationship
 with God, freed of all charges.
 This sounds reassuring.
 But what if our faith is weak?
 What if we have doubts?
 How much faith do we need to stand in grace?

Suppose our lives have no peace,
 but only disharmony, disappointment,
 disgrace, and distress.
 Does that mean that we have too little faith?
 Paul addresses this concern at verse 3:
 He calls this condition “our sufferings.”
 “We also boast in our sufferings.”
 The Greek means trouble, distress,
 hard circumstances.
 Paul by this time had experienced plenty
 of hard circumstances.
 Paul does not boast **of** his sufferings.
 He knows as well as anyone that
 “oh, woe is me!” only alienates people.
 He says, we boast **in** our sufferings,
 which is like saying “in spite of” our sufferings.
 When God is present with us,
 and we know and feel that presence,
 we have a confidence borne of the peace of God,
 in bad times as well as good.
 Paul continues: “We boast in our sufferings,
 knowing that suffering produces endurance,
 and endurance produces character,
 and character produces hope ...”
 But his logic is all conditional on having faith.
 One interpreter, probably a Calvinist, writes,
 “Paul’s words may sound like encouragement,
 but they really point out our guilt,
 because as unredeemed sinners
 we do not have peace.
 To boast in our sufferings sounds foolish.
 To our minds, suffering should be avoided.”
 Getting back to that “what if” question –
 what if we do not have enough faith –
 Paul’s point is precisely that none of us
 has complete faith,
 none of us completes faith by our own efforts.
 Faith is a continuing revelation.
 In the Great American experiment,
 we boast in our achievements,
 knowing that achievement produces success,

and success produces self-reliance,
and self-reliance produces admiration.
It's true.

Consumer-driven societies like ours
value *success*, not suffering.

We boast in our achievements,
not what Jesus Christ achieved for us.
Our character is what we make of it.
Who knows if we ever have peace with God?
We'll settle for peace with ourselves,
and maybe one or two close friends.
Here's a true story that brings this point home:
Mr. Thomas Carlyle married his office assistant,
and dearly loved her.

But he tended to treat her
as if she were still an employee.

As it happened,
the wife was stricken with inoperable cancer
and was confined to bed for a long time
before she died.

After her funeral,
Carlyle returned to his empty house.
Disconsolate, he went upstairs
to the room in which she had lain for months.
He sat down in the chair beside the bed
and realized that he had not sat there
very often during her long illness.

Thomas picked up her diary,
hoping to reconnect with his wife in its pages.

One entry caught his eye:

"Yesterday he spent an hour with me.
And it was like being in heaven.
I love him so much."

He turned a few more pages and read,
"I listened all day to hear his footsteps.
Now it's late. I guess he won't come to see me."
Carlyle threw the book on the floor
and ran in a driving rain to his wife's fresh grave.

"If only I had known," he sobbed.

Like the dying wife,
God will not force us to pay attention,

will not force our love. But God still loves us,
whether we return that love or not.
(If only we knew.)

"Hope does not disappoint
because God's love has been lavished
on our hearts through the Holy Spirit
that has been given to us."
The preposition 'through' in that passage
unlocks the paradox of love in suffering.
Through the Holy Spirit,
the third person of the trinity,
our hearts are awash in God's suffering love,
continually and Without Further Introduction.
God's grace is free, but not cheap.

If we only knew how much God loves us.
The Englishman wrote the Rolls Royce company
some months after returning to the U.K.

"This date last year,
when I was in Hot Springs, Arkansas,
you flew a mechanic over to help me.
He fixed my car, but I've never received a bill.
I'll be happy to pay whatever is owed."

He received a letter back:
"We have no record
that anything was wrong with a Rolls-Royce
in the location you speak of.
In any event, you would owe us nothing.
We thank you for being such a loyal customer
that you drove our nameplate
on holiday overseas."

When a customer has access
to that kind of grace, however undeserved,
the customer has peace.
That kind of grace is free, but not cheap.
The customer has hope that does not disappoint.
In our standing before God,
can we be any less deserving
than a customer of Rolls-Royce?
Can our God be any less gracious
than a corporation?
It's all conditional on faith in Christ.

Again the question: Do I have faith?
 Faith in Christ is a relationship.
 Faith is trusting Christ
 beyond what I already know for sure.
 Faith is a process,
 a kind of spiritual continuing education.
 Faith always seeks to know more,
 to understand more.
 Like the daily bread of Jesus' prayer,
 faith is what sustains me through suffering
 and even through death.
 Faith is not a set of beliefs,
 any more than reciting a Christian creed
 makes us Christ-like.
 Faith is not membership in a church,
 although church is a good place to grow faith.
 Faith is not a revolving credit account with God.
 Faith in Christ is the willingness to proceed
 to the margin of doubt.
 Faith is not something I "have,"
 it's something I live into, alongside doubt.
 As in any relationship,
 faith is not the absence of doubt
 but rather acknowledgement
 of the legitimacy of doubt.
 Doubt is a necessary part of a healthy relationship.
 If you were absolutely sure
 you and your partner were meant for each other,
 you would take the relationship for granted.
 Doubt renews the relationship, again and again,
 even as that doubt is displaced by trust.
 I trust that you find room in your faith life,
 even here in worship, for honest doubt.
 Israel certainly did.
 The bible is candid about doubt of God's presence.
 Sarah overhears the prophecy
 that she will bear a son. And she laughs to herself.
 Even the psalmist wonders,
 "What are human beings,
 that you are mindful of them?"
 Paul's Letter to the Romans is dense, slow-going.

It can feel as labored as a telephone menu.
 But the essence of Romans 5 is hope.
 Since that first Easter morning,
 the world has been awash in hope.
 Through faith in the risen Christ,
 we need No Further Introduction
 to stand before God.
 Through the gift of the Holy Spirit,
 we are filled with God's love,
 God's suffering love.

Praise be to the Father who lavishes us with love,
 the Son who clears our account
 of all indebtedness,
 and the Spirit who breathes the holy
 into each one of us.
 Amen.