

Made right (11 A; Romans 5:1-8)

I fear we may reject the justification metaphor too quickly and understand it too shallowly.

by [Greg Carey](#)

June 12, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

It's been a good long while since I heard a sermon on justification.

I believe the last time was about four years ago, when I served on the staff of a Lutheran congregation. (Lutherans are big on justification.) As far as I recall, every justification sermon I've ever heard emphasizes how we individually reside in God's grace.

So it seems to be with Abraham. Abraham, Paul tells us, believed God, which was accounted to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6). Our words *justification*, *justified*, and *righteousness* all derive from the same Greek word group that revolves around justice. God counts Abraham as just on account of Abraham's faith, Paul expounds at length, and so we too can be justified through faith (Rom. 4:1-25).

Abraham's example shows us "therefore" that we enjoy peace with God because God "counts" us as righteous. Many contemporary believers shy away from the counting metaphor Paul uses.

For one thing, Abraham apparently does not need Jesus in order for God to count him righteous, so why should we? Cannot God freely justify us on any grounds God chooses? We also object to the notion of God counting some people righteous but not others. It seems formulaic and arbitrary rather than relational.

Finally, Paul attributes this mystery to Christ's death: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." How, modern readers want to know, can an unjust execution demonstrate divine love, much less effect justification?

I share every one of these reservations. Yet I also fear we may reject the justification metaphor too quickly and understand it too shallowly. In ordinary human relationships, I suspect we all know the experience of having done something very wrong yet having been treated with an abundance of grace just the same: without shame and with full inclusion. It's a powerful experience.

In college I concocted a scheme for getting around a French assignment. (Yikes, this still doesn't reflect well on me.) When Professor Jim Vest realized what I'd done, he simply gave me an exasperated look. Not a single word. Message received, but he never brought up the offense again. On the contrary, he later asked my help with a research task. Thirty-five years later we remain friends, and the only time that story comes up is when I mention it. That may seem a petty example, but my devotion to Professor Vest has everything to do with the dignity with which he treated me then.

Justification, then, is more than transactional. Where most contemporary translations read "justify" and "justification," older English translations used "rectify" and "rectification." Justification involves more than just declaring us to be right, what theologians have called "imputed righteousness." Justification also entails *making us right*, repairing us and the world.

Even in Romans 5, where Paul celebrates our being justified by Christ's blood, he also uses the language of participation. According to Paul, God's love manifests itself through the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts. Far more than a formal declaration, more than a passing over of sins, God's work of justification includes our transformation. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God is repairing us and the world.