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The Third Sunday in Lent

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Romans Chapter 5 is a piece of writing that can change

your life. Indeed, many in the Christian tradition – not least the Protestant Reformers – found it to be a deep well filled with the living water of the Gospel, there to slake the thirst of the sin-parched soul. *But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* Here in this exalted statement, Paul offers us the central mystery of Christian experience, how we come to experience God not as a cold and callous judge but as a kind and loving Parent. The technical word for how humans come off the witness stand and into divine embrace is Justification. *Since we have been justified by faith,* the Apostle writes.

Now Romans is a notoriously dense piece of theology. Sometimes reading and trying to make meaning of it feels like you are chewing on a golf ball looking for flavor. Romans is almost like a strange and foreign land, where the author and first hearers share this difficult language, and if you aren't one of the theological locals, you may scratch your head at words like *atonement, expiation, covenant, election,* and our word for this morning justification. I want to pull this semi-foreign word down off the shelf and think with you about why many have found living water in this word, and to do so by putting Romans 5 in conversation with an unlikely piece of pop culture, the HBO hit series called *White Lotus*.

White Lotus is a murder-mystery, a lush whodunit where the viewer plays detective as ridiculously attractive people parade around stunningly exotic locations; where everyone – all these beautiful people – might very well be a murderer. Even the characters who are genuinely trying to make the world a better place eventually seem capable of killing someone.

On the surface, the White Lotus, an international luxury hotel chain, offers a 21st-century heaven. Armond, the unforgettable hotel manager in the first season, orders his bellhops and maitre-ds to attend each guest as if they are “the special, chosen baby child of the hotel.” The resort is both cushy and authentic. “I was told that the cheese here was made by a blind nun in a basement!” says Tanya, the hilariously self-absorbed heiress and loyal customer. Truly,

life at any White Lotus hotel is as fulfilling as money can buy.

Despite the Insta-worthy scenery, the show's writer and director Mike White has a knack for presenting human nature without a filter. In a *New York Times* article written after Season 1,¹ Alexis Soloski aptly described White's talent for depicting "the gulf between the people we imagine ourselves to be and the people we actually are." White's cast of characters are compellingly miserable and conflicted. From Portia, the recent college grad who is desperate "to be satisfied," to Mark, the aimless dad who wants nothing more than to be respected, each person is dealing with sorrows that run deeper than the deepest of pockets. No matter how exquisite the scenery is, no matter how impeccable the makeup, the integrity of each person is staged in the natural, unflattering light of day. In that kind of light, there is only one thing needed: justification.

In the light of day, sin is evenly distributed among every character. Each person is either trying to right their wrongs, justify their wrongs, or reveal someone else's wrongs. "We're all just trying to win the game of life," one of them says, but, from where we sit, it's quite clear that all of them are losing.

In every character's fight to be justified, they are thoroughly convinced of being the only innocent person in the room. Everyone is simultaneously the protagonist in their own story and the antagonist in someone else's story. In each person's eyes, they are simply "doing their best." Each person's sin — whether it's lust, self-pity, entitlement or self-righteousness — can be easily explained and pardoned in their own minds. Meanwhile, the speck in their neighbor's eye is undeniable and unforgivable. Everyone has an enemy disguised as a friend and, more often than not, it's oneself.

White Lotus has it all: killer vistas, beautiful people, luxury options galore: yet for all the fruit infused water, fancy cocktails, and extensive spa treatment options, the resort lacks a way for its vacationers to justify their lives; to discover the ground and meaning of their existence beyond pleasure. When Paul tells us that we are justified by faith, he's trying

to undercut this perpetual human instinct to justify oneself through one's appearances, through that inveterate tendency we all have to appear good, put together, innocent, and not as dysfunctional as those people over there. When we stop living by faith, and live by appearances, by self-justification, we live against God's intended wishes for the world. We live in such a way that we don't feel God as loving; we feel God as wrathful. As against us. And in a very real way, God is against this kind of life, this life that doesn't live by grace and faith.

Yes, yes, you say – this all sounds reasonable. Live by faith; open myself to grace; live in harmony, not at odds with God. But why did Jesus have to die for any of this to happen? One can have faith, know grace, experience harmony without indulging in a story about Calvary. Why take a perfectly good message – “God is love” – and attach it to a grizzly, undignified concept like crucifixion?

The question often gets asked: do you believe human beings are innately good or innately selfish and fallen? You've heard this question, no doubt, and you can sometimes predict a lot about someone's politics and religion based on their answer. Humans are good – ah, you must be a progressive; likely warming to Rousseau in your PoliSci 101 class who said that humans are born free and good, and yet are “everywhere in chains” in a corrupt society; likely you believe education is the key to allow goodness to flourish. If you think we are more innately selfish and cruel, well, you may lean more conservative, wanting to focus attention on the renovation of individual character before spending resources reforming societal structures that corrupt and craven individuals will inevitably spoil.

Are human beings wondrously good or incurably self-centered, Paul? I think the Apostle would say “yes.” We are the species that invented democracy, but also slavery. We are the species that came up with works like Dante's Divine Comedy and Shakespeare's plays, and yet we also have the capacity to dream up propaganda and fake news and literal lies. We're the species that designed the amphitheater, the aqueduct and also the cross. We are the species that can

understand the mysteries of the cosmos, and yet we so often struggle to understand the greatest mystery around in ourselves. We've invented the vaccine to help our fellow humans, and yet the human heart is still infected with fear of these same humans. Human beings are a species that aspire to greatness, and yet are so often ashamed at their own lack of goodness.

Given the paradox we are, the Apostle writes: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The greatest love is revealed in the darkest place, and the cross of Jesus, is God wanting to be with us in our darkest hour. In our rage when we were about to put another on a cross; in our despair when we were about to put ourselves on one; just then, just there is where God is. There not as vindictive judge; not as a muscular superhero – but as an ordinary human being who loves us. *When we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Here's the point Paul is trying to make: God doesn't love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good. And the goodness of that love proves itself in taking in the worst our race can dream up. *What else is love,* writes Anne Lamott, *but seeing the darkness in another human being and refusing the impulse to jump ship?* For Paul, that's the divine love that justifies us in our depths.

There are three brief implications here for our lives that I'd like us to tease out. The first: we are free to see other people with true compassion. We see others not as failed saints, or as guilty sinners, not as heroes, villains, or celebrities – we see others as paradoxes, as bundles of aspiration and fear and hope. And as the paradox that they are, they often don't need an answer to their existence – there are no answers to paradoxes – but a presence to accompany them in their confusion and questing. Writing this, I was reminded of my friend Glen, at whose funeral someone said of him: “he was endlessly curious about people not like him, people he even disagreed with; he was curious but never condemning.”

Secondly, we are free to give up trying to appear good. What hounds us is the supposition that we are only loved in

and because of our goodness, of the value we contribute to another person, community, or contribute to God. Because value is tied to what we contribute, we seek to appear good, useful, right, playing for the winning team. Christ didn't die for us while we were good people. Christ died for us while we were at our worst. Christ died for us that evening we snapped at our child. Christ came to embrace us when we couldn't put down the bottle. Christ put his arms around us the moment after the divorce papers were signed. God shows God's love for us not when we give ourselves to God, but when we give up on ever doing so perfectly. Christ died for us while we were still sinners not to help bad people become good; but to help scared people become whole.

Third, because faith has so much more to do with being whole than being good, we are able to embark on the journey of repentance and reconciliation and healing. Take an issue that I and we at St. Anne's care deeply about in racial reconciliation: we don't have to be defensive on this topic; we don't have to be defensive about what our ancestors did. We are justified by God, not our last names. We can be honest about where we've come from; we can tell the truth about the story of our land. We can listen, truly listen to others, without wearing our usual armor. No longer addicted to appearing good because we've encountered a God who has met us at our worst, we enter into tough conversations, and own up to difficult truths. Not in fear, but expectantly: expectant that God will continue to be present in the darkest of places, restoring, renewing, bestowing new life, new hope, new futures.

To be justified by faith is to trust that there is a vision, a gaze, a presence, a love that sees through the masks we wear, and loves us even still. This love doesn't leave you as you are, as it intends to make you not so much good, but whole; not a perfected saint, but a human learning to live with less shame. You can know this freedom at White Lotus and at St. Anne's. It's a love shining through all things – justifying what is by bestowing its own eternal goodness, drawing it all into a peace made possible by the one who

descended into the depths of our darkness to make known the deeper depths of love.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/arts/television/white-lotus-mike-white.html>