

A funny little piece recently appeared in *The Onion*, a satirical magazine. The headline read "Man Gets Life In Order For 36 Minutes". "Briefly overcoming a near-continuous streak of disorganization, area man Terry Oberlin, 37, got his life together for exactly 36 minutes, sources confirmed Monday. According to family reports, Oberlin's bills for the month were paid, the living room was vacuumed, the dishes from dinner were all washed and put away, and the father of two was sitting in his favorite chair in the living room without a single thing in his life out of place.

"It was nice to get some chores out of the way," Oberlin told reporters later, acknowledging that for more than half an hour he experienced no regrets, despair, or frustration of any kind. "Felt really good."

"During this period, he did not once concern himself with his finances, his in-laws, or his dental coverage. And as his mind began to wander freely, he neither relived painful humiliations from his past, nor felt any anxiety about his personal shortcomings. Household sources reported that Monday's 36 minutes of perfect order came to an end when the phone rang and Oberlin picked up the extension in his living room. It was his mother-in-law...."

36 minutes seems like a pretty good run to have your life together, experiencing no regrets, despair, or frustration of any kind. My life, it seems, is never perfectly in order, even for 3 minutes. This is the nature of life, isn't it? If it's not one thing, it's another. Or as Freud likes to say, "If it's not one thing, it's your mother."

We relate to the *Onion* spoof because it plays on our insecurities in light of two prevailing American myths – the myth of the Marlboro Man and the myth of the Renaissance Man or Woman.

Back when they used to advertise for cigarettes on tv, I remember being profoundly affected by the Marlboro Man. He was a rugged cowboy who lived alone on the range. He smoked his Marlboro's while he rustled up the cattle. He was handsome, independent and self-sufficient. He had no need of anybody else. That is until he died from emphysema. From the Surgeon General I learned that I was not supposed to smoke, but from the Marlboro Man I learned I was supposed to be independent and self-sufficient.

After I turned off the tv and went to school, we went on a field trip to Monticello to learn about Thomas Jefferson, who in addition being our 3rd President, also founded a university, authored the Declaration of Independence, spoke 6 languages, and was lawyer, agronomist, scientist, philosopher, architect, inventor, and statesman. And he played the violin.

From Thomas Jefferson, I learned I was supposed to be a good at everything; I was supposed to be a Renaissance Man. It turns out the TJ couldn't keep his life together for even 36 minutes either, and he had the benefit of 200 or so slaves at his disposal. But I didn't learn that on my field trip. I learned I was supposed to excel in all areas. Martha Stewart has this effect on women of a certain generation. Even her jail time didn't appreciably reduce the degree to which women feel insufficient in her presence!

The Renaissance Man is a close cousin of the Marlboro Man, even though Marlboro Man presumably only spoke one language – Western – because if you excel in all things then you have no need of anyone to do anything else for you. You can do them yourself. “Like I always say, Ethel, if you want something done right, you do it yourself.”

The Marlboro Man clearly never read today's passage from 1 Corinthians. Thomas Jefferson surely read it, but then he got out his scissors and excised it from the Holy Bible. The Apostle Paul gives us an opposite message: we are not supposed to be good at everything and we are all dependent on one another.

We're talking in this New Year about what it really means to be justified by faith and not by works. Our reading this morning shows us how justification by faith plays out in community life. Those who have come to the end of themselves – those who have come to nothing and therefore trust in God for their lives are called the “body of Christ.” *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it,”* Paul says.

To be justified by faith and not by works means that we “drink of the one Spirit”, and that we are joined to each other in that Spirit. We are one body, some of us are hands, some eyes, some ears. To use Paul's language, some of us are “*honorable and presentable*” and some of us are “*less honorable and unpresentable.*” Paul leaves the specifics of those terms – who's exactly what and what's exactly who - for us to figure out!

What we can figure out pretty quickly from this analogy is that being justified by faith and not by works means that we don't have to be good at everything. It means that we don't have to have our lives in order all the time. It means that we don't have to be independent and self-sufficient.

In fact, being justified by faith means that we say to one another “I have need of you.” *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’* The earthquake in Haiti has shown us a very concrete example of how the body works. Most of us cannot go to Haiti to help. But at least one of us, Dr. Mike Dickens, goes regularly to minister medically to the Haitian people.

Some of us are able to give money to support Mike and his Haitian patients. The Bascoms, other members of our body here, own a car wash. They donated all of their proceeds yesterday to Mike's ministry. Some of us can't give money, but we can pray for Mike and the people of Haiti. And some of us can go get our car washed! We don't have to be good at everything. But when Mike goes, we go, because Mike is part of our body. And Mike will tell you that he has need of us in order to go - not just our money, but also our prayers.

To be justified by faith and not by works is to say to one another, "I have need of you." To amplify that idea, being justified by faith means that we say, "I have need of you because I am not good at this and I need help with this." We lead with our weakness and let others identify our strength. In the world, it's the other way around. We boast of our strengths or our gifts and then we nitpick and gossip about another's weakness.

This is not the way of those justified by faith. Although I know this to be true, I have a hard time really believing this, because the myths of independence and self-sufficiency were drilled in deep. But I know the truth of the Bible is deeper and truer, and I also know that being justified by works is a terrible way to live. I want to live God's way. The world's way is no good.

Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet, wrote a funny, profound and accessible poem about the need to say to one another "I have need of you" in a world that doesn't care. It's called "At A Certain Age":

We wanted to confess our sins but there were no takers.
White clouds refused to accept them, and the wind
was too busy visiting sea after sea./We did not succeed in interesting the animals.
Dogs, disappointed, expected an order,
A cat, as always immoral, was falling asleep.
A person seemingly very close/Did not care to hear of things long past.
Conversations with friends over vodka or coffee
Ought not to be prolonged beyond the first sign of boredom. It would be humiliating
to pay by the hour A man with a diploma, just for listening.
Churches. Perhaps churches. But to confess there what?...

Churches, code word for those who have been justified by faith and made into a body - we are the people to confess to one another our sins, weakness and needs. To be justified by faith and not by works is to say, "I have need of you."

All this because God Himself, the Taker of our sin, became the less presentable member, dying a dishonorable death on the cross. And we, His body, come together Sunday after Sunday to say with one voice, "Lord, we have need of You." Amen.