

Brit Hume, the Television Journalist, has been in the news because he had the audacity to suggest that Tiger Woods might be helped by Christianity. He was, of course, slammed by the media on two counts: using his position as a bully pulpit and inferring that Christianity offers something other religions don't. I feel that Brit Hume got it exactly right. He zeroed in on what Christianity is all about and what makes it unique among all religions.

He summed it up well in an interview with Christianity today. Responding to criticisms about people like Ted Haggard or Mark Sanford, who, like Tiger, were part of a sex scandal, Hume replied, "*I don't think I would blame Christianity for the failings of people like that. Christianity is the right religion for people like that. Christianity is a religion for sinners. Christianity is not about the salvation of perfect people. Christianity is a way for people who are not perfect to be saved. What Mark Sanford needs is not less Christianity. He needs more of it.*"

The theological term for Hume's description is "justification by faith". Justification by faith is on my mind with a new fervor as we begin this New Year together at Christ Church.

It's on my mind because justification by faith is God's way for us to live as happy, creative, loving people. It's on my mind because people who are justified by faith are freed up to love God, love their neighbor, and to serve the world. It's on my mind because this is what Christianity is all about! This is what I want for me, for you, and for us.

Justification by faith is on my mind because I feel that even though I believe God's way to be the right and best way, I think I'm only beginning to understand what it means to actually live as though I were "*justified by faith apart from works of the law.*" (Romans 3:28)

It seems to me that if God has gone to the trouble to justify us by faith, the least we could do is try to understand what this means for us. Certainly, this is my job as a preacher. But, one of the major obstacles in preaching is that language, even Bible language, grows stale. Ideas are explosive and life changing; their verbal casing needs constant revision. Justification by faith apart from the Law is no exception.

I'm always looking for new ways to say the old and unchanging truth. So what other ways do we talk about justification by faith apart from works? Martin Luther says "*it is certain a man must utterly despair in his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.*" (Heidelberg Disputation, #18). Our prayer of Humble Access calls it no longer "*trusting in our own righteousness.*" This is what Paul Zahl called "*giving up*" in the Institution Sermon last month.

One way we talk about it is that we are known and yet loved. Another way is that you are totally accepted exactly as you are. Another way is that you are completely loved despite yourself. Another way is that we bring nothing to the table in our relationship with God.

In thinking about a new way to talk about justification by faith for this New Year I came up with ...nothing. Not nothing in that I couldn't think of *some* thing or *any* thing, but nothing in more of a King Lear kind of way, where "nothing" is one of the major themes of the play. Or more recently and more accessibly, Seinfeld, the self-proclaimed show about "*nothing*". There was no real plot in Seinfeld; just humor, creativity, and relationship.

Being justified by faith means being justified by doing...nothing. All the ways that we try to justify ourselves, prove ourselves, make our mark for ourselves, for God and the world mean...nothing. In fact, all these shenanigans hinder us. To be justified by faith apart from works is to be entirely on the receiving end, having done nothing at all. This is a sermon about nothing.

This galls most people. Most people instinctively kick against the Grammar of theology, in which God is always the subject and you are always the object. And yet when ballyhoo about our own ability finally dies down, then we see what goodies are there, waiting for us. We see that though we do nothing, God does everything! And this is where the gospel according to Isaiah comes in this morning.

Look what God does in this Scripture! He creates you, forms you. He redeems you. He calls you by name. He says you are His. And that's all in just the first verse!! So God made you, He knows you, and He claims you. You are His people. He knows you through and through, and yet He loves you. Verse 4 says, "*because you are precious in my eyes and honored, I love you.*" You are known and yet loved.

All of this is because we are justified by faith. What we do in this equation is...nothing. God is the subject, we are the object. As I said earlier, it is the way to be happy, free, creative and loving people. And this anchor is everything, because life is not a journey, but a train wreck.

To be known and yet to be loved is to be happy and secure in life. I love our own Sons of Bill song called Roll on Jordan. James Wilson invites us to "*see what boy from Galilee can do.*" "*In this sad world we live in it sure can get you down, when you can't seem to get your head on straight and your feet back on the ground. Well every little thing is gonna be alright, it's all gonna be ok, because the sun is still shining over my hometown and I gotta Savior who knows my name.*" I have called you by name and you are mine.

I wouldn't entirely agree with Thomas Hobbes that our lives are "*solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,*" but this sad world we live in is surely filled with hurt and

pain and trauma of one sort or another. In our scripture today Isaiah describes this as passing through the waters and walking through the fires.

You've got your own waters and you've got your own fires. To know that you do nothing and that God does everything is to know that you will be brought through the waters and led through the fires and that you will be o.k. As the Lord says in the gospel according to Isaiah, *"Fear not...When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."*

Why is all this true? Again, because of nothing, nothing that we do. This is a sermon about nothing. And it's also sermon about everything, everything that God does. The flame shall not consume you because (v. 3) "I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

To be sure, the waters and the fires are real – they hurt, and they damage. But, they will not drown you or incinerate you. Brit Hume went through the waters and the fires with the suicide of his son 11 years ago.

Sandy Hume committed suicide at the age of 29 in his apartment in Alexandria, after battling with alcoholism. In the months before his death, Sandy started drinking again and was arrested for drunk driving. He tried to hang himself in jail, was evaluated and released from a psychiatric hospital, and then went home and shot himself with a hunting rifle. His suicide note was filled with shame. The waters and the fires don't get any worse.

This tragedy led Hume to justification by faith, to doing nothing and trusting God for everything. He says, *"I grew up in a Christian family and I went nine years to an Episcopal boys school. I've always been, at least on paper, a Christian. It wasn't until my son died 11 years ago that I began to get serious about it. His death was devastating. I was shattered. Yet through all of that, I had this feeling that God would save me, that he would be there for me, that I was in his hands, and that I was going to be okay. It really happened."* Fear not, I am with you.

This sermon about nothing is a sermon about everything God has done. The Lord says to His people, *"Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give peoples in exchange for your life...Egypt as your ransom."* Because you are precious in His eyes, and honored, and because He loves you, He did not stop there. He gave His own Son in exchange for your life. He gave His own Son for your ransom, a ransom for sinners.

Christianity is the right religion for a person like me, a sinner who needs constant help in the waters and the flames. A sinner who knows he can do nothing, a sinner who is justified by faith, a sinner whose got a Savior who knows His name. This is the Christianity I need more of, not less of. What about you? Amen.

