

Last Sunday night I watched all 4 ½ hours of the series finale of *Lost*, the show about the survivors of a plane wreck on a mysterious island. If you are a *Lost* fan you have probably strong feelings about the way the 6 year show ended; if you didn't watch *Lost* then you sort of know what I'm talking about since it's been all over the media the last few weeks.

I'll give you a spoiler alert because I want to talk about why I loved the last 10 minutes of the show. So don't listen if you somehow haven't seen it and you still want to see it. I thought the ending was unbelievably uplifting and hopeful. Nearly all the characters gather at a church. They are finally off the Island and are sitting in the pews of a light filled church in Los Angeles. It becomes clear that they have all died, although they all look happy and healthy. They've been told to let go and prepare to go through the doors of the church into a brilliant, beautiful, all encompassing Light. They all prepare to go to heaven together.

It sounds a little schlocky, but I thought it was remarkable for a critically acclaimed show out of Hollywood. To be sure, the theology wasn't perfect. It was clear that any basic religion would do, but what's a little heresy among friends? What struck me as biblically true about the ending was the reality of our life after death. When we die, we don't die, we live. We have real bodies. We will be in loving relationship with God and with each other. As Jesus says, *"whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."*

This past week I prayed with the family of a man who had just died – the dead man was right there in the room. Later, the man's sister sent me this wonderful quote. *"Death is not the extinguishing of the light; it is merely the putting out of the lamp because the dawn has come."* This is of particular comfort at Memorial Day, the day we remember those who have died in service to their country.

The overwhelming emotion I had as I watched this ending was how much God loves us – how much God loves his people. The characters in the show are like any group of people. They were a mix of both good and bad. In their lives they had done both terrible things and wonderful things. Judged against the perfect standard of God's law, none of them, like none of us, deserved to be there, waiting to enter into the Dawn's Early Light.

Yet there they were in the church: laughing, hugging, crying tears of joy, bathing in the Dawn Light streaming in through the windows and the doors, each person emanating wonder, love, and well-being. All that they had endured was over; over were the plane wreck and the hurt and suffering and trauma. All that was left was love and delight. Only a God who deeply and dearly loves us, would deliver His undeserving people through the suffering and into the Light.

This is the clear message in our passage from Romans this morning. *"Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Dave and I have been preaching about justification by faith this year and here we have it

in our epistle. Often we've gone at justification by faith from our perspective – the human perspective. We do not deserve this peace with God because of our sin.

I'll give you one more graphic and timely analogy along these lines – about why we need to be justified. I mean, aren't we basically good enough? Sure, as I said, we are a mix of good and bad, but don't we do enough good to cancel out the bad? Can't our own goodness justify us before God? Didn't you learn early on that "good people go to heaven?" Not according to Jesus. Maybe a good person would go to heaven without having to be justified, but Jesus says "no one is good but God alone." If only a heart could be as white as snow.

The dreadful oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico is an apt analogy for the power and consequence of sin in our lives. Jesus says "*there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him... For from within, out of the heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery....*" (Mark 7). The list goes on – more of the terrible things rather than the wonderful things - but that's more than enough for a holiday weekend!

But the 200,000 gallons of oil spewing up from the ocean's bottom serves as a bracing visual image of what we would like to ignore. The fact that the oil leak is deep down below the surface speaks to those of us who are able to "hide" (we think) the sin in our lives. Yet, as we are seeing now, the evidence eventually emerges to the surface

The inability to stem the oil flow reminds me of our own inability to control the flow of ugliness that comes from our hearts. And the consequence of the oil spill is way beyond what anyone could imagine. Who would have thought that an oil explosion in the Gulf of Mexico could threaten the beaches of Cape Hatteras? In the same way, we have no idea how our own sin affects another; mercifully, the full scope of the domino effect of our sin is usually hidden from us.

Thankfully, our spiritual fate is not in the hands of B.P. or the Government. We have real help from the outside. God doesn't cover up our hearts with a big box to contain our sin. Through the death of His Son on the cross, *he forgives our sin* and sees us as clean and right and pure. It's a different kind of top kill, isn't it?

This is what Paul means when he says earlier in Romans, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*" This is what it means to be justified by faith. This is what Jesus means when He says, "*no one comes to the Father, except through me.*" We must go through Jesus, through His suffering and death for our sake. In Him we are made clean – reckoned as righteous. The result for us is peace with God. The result for us the laughing, hugging, tears of joy, bathing in the Dawn's Early light.

This gets us back to justification by faith from God's perspective. Obviously, no one can really speak from God's perspective except God. But God reveals enough about

Himself in the bible for us to know this for sure: He justifies us because He loves us. Or as one of our Vestry Members prayed at our last Vestry meeting: *“He delivers us because He delights in us.”*

God loves you. He adores you. He delights in you. Yes it’s true that you are more wicked than you could possibly imagine; there is more oil spewing from your heart than you can possibly conceive. Yet, it is also true that you are more loved than you could possibly dream. As one of our prayer book prayers says, God is doing better things for you than you could ask or imagine. How I wish we could really understand this.

Here’s a trivial illustration that’s really not at all trivial. Christie went to the laundry mat on Friday. She hasn’t been in a laundry mat in 20 years, but she needed a washing machine big enough to wash our bedspread and down comforter. When she got there she couldn’t figure out how much the washing machine cost. She didn’t know quite what to do.

There were two really young women a few machines over. Christie was a little embarrassed that she didn’t know her way around a laundry mat, but she had no choice but to ask these two women how much money it would cost. (22 quarters, by the way.) The women responded by immediately holding out their hands filled with quarters and said, *“Do you need money? Here, please take these quarters.”* Those two women at the laundry mat showed Christie God’s heart for His people: loving, giving, justifying. He delivers you because He delights in you.

I’ll close with a scene from the 3rd act of Thornton Wilder’s famous play, *“Our Town.”* The writers of *Lost* surely had this scene in mind. Several characters from the first two acts are on stage. They have died, but they are alive. Emily, a young woman, enters. Her funeral is happening on another part of the stage. She has just died giving birth to her daughter. Her mother in law welcomes her.

Emily tries to understand her new existence. She says *“Oh I wish I’d been here a long time!”* She talks about her earthly life awhile with Mother Gibbs, her mother in law, and then asks, *“Live people don’t understand, do they?”* *“No, dear – not very much,”* Mother Gibbs replies. Emily responds, *“They’re sort of shut up in little boxes, aren’t they?”*

It’s not the dead who are shut up in little boxes. It is we who live on this earth, but do not know how deeply we are loved by God. It is we who do not know how to *“stand in his grace.”* It is we who do not yet fully understand that we are justified by faith and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.