Ok, today we’re continuing this series on Lutheran theology, and today the word being brought to life I hope, raised from the dead is the word justification. I put this Scripture on the screen last week, as the defining foundation of Lutheran theology. “For we hold that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the law”. Justification is the most important issue in Lutheran theology. From our confessions, justification is the article by which the church stands or falls. Most popular theology today surrounds the issue of salvation. How are we saved? I’ll deal with that next week when I talk about election and damnation. Who is in and who isn’t. How is that handled. But in our theology where you go when you die is hardly the central issue. We are much more concerned about our relationship to God, and our relationships with one another, than where we go when we die. And surely this emphasis is far and away more biblical.

So what is justification? The word that I think that best captures it, is the word balance. Most of us use our computers now and if you’re in a word document or writing a letter, you can easily justify it. You can select the whole text and hit a button and everything will just line up correctly. It’s justified. If you want to justify to the center, you can do that. Or you can justify to the left or the right, hit the button and “boom” it’s lined up, it’s made right. That’s justification. When you put your clothes in the washing machine, at least in the old days, you try to put them in there so that the load is balanced. And when it’s justified, it’s pretty smooth on the spin cycle. Make sense? When you get tires put on your car, they have to be balanced. So they run down the road smoothly. Our lives are filled with things to do, and justification is finding a proper balance there. Between work and family. Between my friends and my spouse. All relationships are in a balance. You can be too connected, or too disconnected. Too much by yourself, too involved with everybody elses business. Right?

Another word for justification is righteousness. Once in a while you’ll hear a car go by and the tires are about of balance. WaWo. That car is unrighteous. Or you let of go the wheel and it and pulls to the right or left. When you’re justified there is a centeredness to you, a calmness, a rest. I remember when I was on the rescue squad here. And you go on a call or fire, Justification is critical, for your safety and being helpful. You can’t get too caught up in the stress or the crisis. If you’re kid cuts themselves and come in the house screaming, you need to be justified. The first thing they’ll say on the plane if there is problem is what? Stay calm. Don’t panick. There is a steadiness in the midst of everything. So you can think and make good decisions. That’s justification. Or righteousness. Holiness. Centeredness, Calm. At ease. You usually have a sense of humor about what you’re doing. Remember Jesus asleep in the boat during the storm? In the midst of the storm he was justified. Calm. This is the article by which the church stands or falls. How are we justified? Kept in balance. Centered.

The opposite of justification then is what? Yup, out of balance. You’re getting caught up in it. “huh, we’re sinking”. You’re getting caught up in the news. Caught up in buying, in doing. There’s all this stuff I have to do. I’ve felt it watching this war in Ukraine. Yea, you can feel yourself begin to sort of lose it. I don’t have enough time in the day. Stress, worry, anxiety take over. There’s no calm center. Too much on my mind. Too worried about what other people think. And then after a while, you start to get angry. Or burned out. Our touchy. You’re “upset” all the time. Well, what got upset? Yeah, your balance. Your not justified.

Do you every watch someone lose their balance, or slip like on the ice? What do you do? “Ohh” Then it’s this panicked kind of grip. That’s our world today. This is a lot of our religion today. End times, those guys make millions. Everything is slipping and people feel out of balance out of control. When you lose your balance you become super serious about what you believe. Earnestness become faith. But there is no peace, no calm, it’s not at ease. Just this desperate need to grab on to something. I get it, I get super serious when I’m out of balance. Watch people talk politics. Super serious. Overly intense. Overly wrapped up in my sermon for example. Happens all the time. Out of balance. Not justified. Unrighteous. Unholy.

Notice that justification by faith is “apart from the works of the law”. Our Lutheran history has often forgotten this. And so I think many us may associate justification with obedience to the law. We try to justify ourselves then, by making excuses. Why didn’t you do your homework. The dog ate it. The teacher is the judge and you have to justify yourself. We believe that we will be made right, if we and everyone will just do as they are told. I’ve said this a few weeks ago, but my mother told me once, “Mark,, everything would be fine if you would just do what I say”. The law becomes the standard. And I’ve run into many parents in my life, and the jist that I get from them is that their life would be balanced if their kid would just behave. If we could just get people to be moral. Our balance becomes determined by how other people behave. And so the 10 commandments go up in the courthouse and this becomes what promises to bring life. God gives the law. Sin is breaking the law. And Jesus forgives us so we can try again. This theology is very popular and I addressed it last week. Obviously here, St. Paul and Luther are not in that theological camp.

So if we don’t get our balance back, from doing what we’re supposed to do, how to we find it? Or get it. Well it’s right there in the verse isn’t it? We get it by Faith. And so our justification, or balance, is not about something we have to do, or are supposed to do. Or try to do. Nope. That’s the law right? Consistent with our theology our balance comes as a gift. It comes as a blessing. It comes as life. We have nothing to do with it. God will bring balance to my life. God does the work. And we call this gift and blessing from God Faith. Faith is a gift. Balance will not come to us, by trying to be balanced. Trying to get our act together. Trying to figure out how to juggle 50,000 things at the same time. God balances us as a gift. As a blessing.

An example of this is found in our lesson from Galatians today. We read the story from Chapter 4 about with way that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman named Hagar, and another by a woman that Paul calls the “free woman”. So one son represents slavery and the other son represent freedom. What’s the difference between the two sons? It’s really simple. The slave woman and Abraham had a son, by doing what they could do on their own. They didn’t need God’s help to do that. But Sarah was barren, she shouldn’t have children. And when Abraham had a child with her, he was too old too. There was no way they could do it on their own. So their son came about as a sheer gift. And that’s the different between slavery and freedom. Between out of balance and balance. Under the law it’s up to you, and your action. But faith is about what God can do and God’s action. God can set you free. God can balance you. Bring that centeredness, that calmness into wherever you are as a gift. By bringing you a Word.

Last Wednesday I went up to Holy Cross to do the Lenten Service. And I got there and they had a potato bar going. And so I got my potato and opened it up and then they gave some chili on it, or I could put it on the side and got other things to put on it. And just as I was getting my potato a woman walked in to the kitchen to say something to me. And this is what she said, “now you make sure that you come back for seconds”. And, it sort of knocked me off balance. Yeah, because I had no intention of coming back for seconds. All I wanted was one potato. But she was sort of, you know turning the gift into a have to. All you have to do, is do what I say. Right? But I resisted and said, “That’s Ok, I’m good with this”. But guess what? That didn’t work. Because here’s what she said next. “You need it”. Oh, now I get it. Ok, here we go. I’m too thin. Too scrawny. I’m not right. I’m not justified. Yeah Ok, my car is too small too, yeah I got the message.

And isn’t that why we get out of balance with everything else? Isn’t that why we get too busy? Or work too hard? Or get too involved? And then get disgusted and say forget it? Isn’t that why we have to keep the argument going, keep the divisiveness up? Get caught up in the stress? Yeah, it’s because deep down we don’t think we’re right. We’re trying to justify ourselves and make ourselves right, all the time. Doing it on our own. Trying to make something of ourselves, live up to some standard of performance. All because deep down we don’t think we’re right. It’s theological, not legal. It’s hard to find that rest. All I want is one potato. Please? How about just a simple word that says, “You’re all right”. That’s faith. That’s God’s Word to you. That lines you up. It’s true that a lot of things in my life might not be right. Maybe I am too scrawny. Or too old. Or too white. Or too young. Yeah, I’m far from perfect, pretty messed up, maybe sick. But I’m made right as a gift, a blessing. Trust it. As a blessing from God. That’s the center. That’s the balance. Isn’t it? That centers us. It calms us down.

Then you can go out into the craziness of the world. A world totally out of balance? A stressed out, burned out world at war. Balanced. Justified by faith apart from the works of the law. That’s where we start. Amen.