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# Come as You Are

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**Text: Galatians 6:11-16 (C - Pentecost 5)**

**W**ho was it? Who told you that you weren't good enough? Who was it who convinced you that you just didn't measure up? It seems like everybody's had one: some person who brought out the worst in you because they expected the worst. For some people, it's their parents; for others perhaps a teacher; for many, unfortunately, a pastor. Let's admit the truth. Someone somewhere once told you at a vulnerable time that you didn't measure up and somehow it stuck. Well, that's the kind of situation the Apostle Paul must address with the Galatians, too. Some other preachers have told them that they must be circumcised. Though they already enjoyed the Spirit's presence in their midst, the Galatians heard that they needed to do more. They now had another hoop to jump, another hurdle to get over. Paul had to speak a word to a people who were convinced that they weren't good enough.

Naturally, we understand. We live in a world that wants us to measure up. The world wants us to meet *its* expectations. All you have to do is listen to the world tell you who you are. Try scanning your TV some time. Surf the channels on your set and you'll find out what our world wants you to be. On one channel there's a shampoo commercial. They'll tell you how your hair is too oily or too dry or too lifeless right now. But buy their shampoo and you'll be posing for the cameras wherever you go. Now change the channel and what do you see? An ad for a top-of-the-line import luxury automobile. You may be a nobody in your GM compact right now, but just imagine yourself at the wheel of a high per-

formance car, with a wood-grain dashboard in front of you and real leather seats beneath you. Just think of the power and prestige you'll project! Now surf the airways with your remote control one last time. There on your TV is a spot for deodorant. Perhaps you ought not be proud about how you smell right now, but use this product, and you can be sure and confident in public.

Do you get the picture? The world's job is to raise the bar higher and higher. It depends on you feeling inadequate to such a degree that you'll buy what the man is selling you on the cathode ray tube. Yet this constant multi-media badgering is not some blip on the screen. Every time you buy something, you put more money in the coffers of the very people who turn around and spend your cash on increasingly guilt-inducing advertising ploys. They have an interest in getting you to raise the bottom line on what is beauty or power or money – and when they do, they've got you. The next thing you know you find yourself singing their advertising mantras to yourself. "If we just buy the right product, purchase the right thing, we will be right by everybody else." The world would compel us to live by its standards. This world tells us: measure up!

So how do we as the church respond? For the most part, by getting right with the world. We Christians try to justify ourselves in the eyes of those around us. We church people have bought the world's pitch. Ever seen those glossy fashion magazines with their pouty models to show us what to look like? We also have glossy church catalogs to help us gussy up our churches. Just flip through the pages of the latest Augsburg Fortress catalog. On one page is a bevy of gorgeous new choir robes; on the next a display of gleaming brass sanctuary paraphernalia, on a third a state-of-the art church marquee. The message is clear. We'll gladly buy into what the world is telling us about ourselves – and pay for postage and handling too. Yet underlying these glossy pages is a startling presumption: that we are inadequate as we are. In this way even we in the church fall prey to justifying ourselves according to the worldly standards of consumerism or fashion or beauty.

What drives our self-justifying compulsion? Our misplaced belief that if only we did something more, we could succeed. You know, "If only we could make the customer happy, then we could grow a bigger membership roll...If only we could make the right stewardship pitch, our budgets would balance by the Annual Meeting...If only we could project

the right image to the public, then we could beat the competition down the street.” Of course, the true problem is not any of these issues. The real problem is how we measure success. With our definitions of success we have already bought into the world’s inadequacy game. What will it be? The number of customers served in our pews (a la McDonalds) our ecclesiastical balance sheet (like big business), or sheer magnitude of church property (like some real estate cartel). Yet here’s the sad truth. No matter which of these criteria for success we choose, the battle’s already lost. We’re playing a game that we cannot win. We’re trying to justify ourselves in the eyes of the world around us.

But listen up: all those worldly standards fall at the feet of Christ crucified. There are no grounds for self-justification beneath the cross. Do you remember the movie *Gandhi*? The film is about the non-violent revolution against the British in the 1940s, led by a slight, simply dressed man. There’s a scene in the movie where Gandhi leads a group of his people to a British salt factory. Gandhi is trying to reclaim his land from the occupying force by non-violently demonstrating that every bit of land, every resource in India, belongs to its people. As a way of showing this Gandhi has column after column of his non-violent resisters approach the entrance to the factory. As each column meekly approaches the entrance, the British soldiers savagely beat Gandhi’s defenseless cohorts. Yet Gandhi’s followers do not give up. By the hundreds, by the thousands they all stand in line to take their turn at approaching the gate. Then, as we watch Gandhi’s followers take a beating, the camera pulls back to reveal a Western newspaperman also witnessing the event. We see this reporter talking on the phone with his newspaper back home. After he describes the bloody scene at the factory gate for the newspaper article, he pauses and adds, “Any claim to moral superiority that the West has ever had has been lost today.”

Well if this can be said of a non-violent uprising at a salt factory in India, how much more we can say about the impact of Jesus on the cross. At the cross no human measures, no worldly standards can possibly stand. We remember the sordid picture. First there’s the standards of the religious authorities. “Crucify him,” the religious leaders chant. Then there’s “the customer is always right” mentality of the masses. “Crucify him,” the crowd jeers before Pilate. Finally there are the standards of the law and order community. What does the Roman military do? They crucify him. To be sure, for three long days their judgment

stood. For three days in the tomb their standards seemed to hold firm. That is, until the stone was rolled away. For Jesus, whom the standards of the religious leaders, the crowds and security forces, put to death – this Jesus is risen. Now their standards are null and void. At the cross they were shown to be what they truly are.

So line them all up: Bay Street, Madison Avenue, Paris and Milan. Thanks to the cross of Christ all these worldly standards have been emptied of their power. They no longer have to hold sway over us. How did the apostle put it? “The world has been crucified to me,” Paul exclaims, “the world has been crucified to me...and I to the world.” Imagine that. Worldly standards need no longer apply. With Christ crucified there are no longer grounds for justifying ourselves.

Of course, that’s good news! That means Christ justifies us now. Christ sets us right with God already. Perhaps that is why we start most Sunday services by pronouncing forgiveness. Before we even start to praise God in hymns and prayers, we receive a flat-out word of God’s mercy. What better reminder of our justified status before God! Before we even get a chance to earn our way into God’s good graces with the flattery of praise, we hear God’s forgiveness first off. How do the words of pardon go? “In the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you, and for his sake God forgives you all your sins.” We might as well check our self-justifying pride at the door and hang them up on the coat racks outside like so many hats and jackets. Before we even really start to worship, God is *already* forgiving us. Who needs self-justification? We have **grace**! Through Christ we are justified before we even know it! It’s as if we found ourselves suddenly invited to the world’s best party. Imagine receiving an urgent invitation to take part in a real cosmic blowout, RSVP ASAP. No wonder the invite is urgent – this splendid banquet is already prepared: fresh-baked bread and the finest wine. So what do we do – hot invitation in hand? Why, we scamper about, put on our finest suit, scurry off to the hairdresser to get our look just right, and buy some flowers as a gift for the host. Then we rush off to the banquet. What with so much to do, we’re already late. When we finally arrive we’re the only ones outside – the host stands at the door. Looking in the banquet hall we’re surprised to see row upon row of tables with people already feasting – people with ragged clothes, unkempt hair and empty hands. Then the host looks at us...and with arms extended in welcome – says, “Aww, join in the party anyway. But didn’t you notice your ban-

quiet invitation said 'come as you are'?" Then in the joy of the moment, a smile spreads across our faces. All our attempts to insinuate ourselves into the good graces of the Host were for naught. We got mercy before we knew it. In the Host's eyes we were already accepted. How did the great theologian Paul Tillich put it? "Although you are unacceptable," Tillich says, "you are *accepted*." There's no need to prove ourselves in God's eyes. In Christ we already stand justified.

So, who told you that you didn't measure up? It wasn't God. God calls you justified in Christ. God sees you as new creation material. So let's give up our world's self-justifying madness. Then in that letting go we can also let God make of us something new.