

Are You Saved?

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32;
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36 - 8:3

[Introduction: To put into context what's happening this morning, is to remind you what happens as the readings through the year unfold, and those of you who are regularly attending worship get the great benefit of that. Just a few weeks ago we celebrated Christ's resurrection; then we celebrated His appearances and what it means to have His presence with us; then we were given to understand the three appearances of God to people in the world, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and then this week, we begin to look at what it means to live as Christians in the world, how our salvation is worked out, and what it means for us and the way we conduct ourselves as, if you will, disciples of Christ.]

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Hey mate. How are you?" I was sitting in the Student Union with a cup of coffee taking a break from studying in the library, and before me were two students carrying Bibles. That should have been a tip off to me for what came next.

"Are you saved?" one of them asked. The rest of the conversation was very short and I won't bore you with the details, but I found it a disturbing question on two counts: First, I was deeply offended at the presumption and arrogance that lay behind the question. And second, because I had some distinctly disturbing feelings that I probably wasn't saved after all.

Fortunately, many . . . well, just many years have passed since, and it has been my experience that the question of an individual salvation really being okay with God, actually getting into the Kingdom of Heaven, is a common one for people. It's the question that lies at the heart of all the lessons we heard this morning.

David is caught out for arranging the death of his neighbor so he can continue his adulterous affair with the neighbor's wife.

The Psalmist laments his sinfulness.

Paul writes to the Galatians about God's law and its place in God's scheme of things.

And, in the gospel, Jesus has a very sensuous encounter with a woman which deeply offends his host.

Each reading raises the question of how one acts in everyday life and the real implications our actions have for our salvation. And there's the heart of the matter for us when we consider the prospect of our salvation, and the salvation of those whom we love. It's not that we're not good people. It's not that we're not loving and caring and compassionate. It's not that, it's not that at all.

The fact is, when we're honest about it, we all have things in our past (maybe even in our present) that lead us to believe they're actually going to count against us in the end, and there's some that will exclude us from the kingdom of heaven.

It's clear enough. Those who break God's law are condemned – no if's, and's or but's. The law is quite clear. Once the Law of God has been transgressed, death is the consequence, and there's no difference between the biggie breaks and the little ones. Unless . . . Unless, we want to say, unless we are forgiven. Or, as my student interrogators would say, unless we've been "saved". Then in their way of seeing things, once saved, salvation forever is guaranteed. They were then free to go around the campus saving the souls of the unsaved. Saved souls, they would say, would keep the law of God and the whole world would change. And, as humans are wont to, as they're free to, then they condemn all the acts and actors who, in their view, live and act contrary to God's law.

Such reasoning surrounds us and is all too evident today. The great crusade to establish the moral purity of citizen and nation by bringing into being the rule and law of God. It's one of the major motivating forces in our public and political life.

My mother thought along the same lines. Whenever I transgressed, and I confess when I was under her charge many, many, many years ago, my transgressions were many and frequent. Some of which my mother resolved with immediate punishment. My Mother's large wooden jam spoon was a handy instrument of correction when applied to the sensitive areas of my buttocks. The same was true of my time at high school, believe it or not. Though my transgressions at high school were fewer, some of them were no less egregious. At high school the cane was readily at hand, which was tucked into the sleeves of the masters' academic gowns and could be instantly retrieved and applied along the same lines my mother employed with the jam spoon. But there were those occasions when my behavior was far beyond my mother's inclination to correct, and then I had to await the application by my father, of his leather razor strop to the same sensitive portions of my anatomy.

But the ultimate punishment of consequence was my mother's grim and icy declaration, "God knows what you've been up to. One of these days you're going to go too far and God Himself will reach down and punish you! So there!" In that way, I was helped to develop an early formative theology (don't laugh – we've all been there) of a God who kept score and who on judgment day, would do the arithmetic and dispatch me (at least) to the fires of hell.

Unless, unless of course I had been good, doing good things, keeping God's law – then, then there was a chance, faint though it might be, of me being allowed to enter the kingdom after all. It's the sort of reasoning that lies behind the unending cartoons and stories depicting Saint Peter at the gates of heaven interrogating the dearly departed and checking the bookkeeping to decide who finally gets through the pearly gates and who will be dispatched to the nether world. Now, we all chuckle at the depiction, but the truth of the matter is that even behind our chuckles there lies a quiet discomfort if not even a quiet fear.

Paul was onto that. It lies at the heart of today's reading from his letter to the Galatians. Now if any of the apostles were sensitive to the way God's law worked, it was Paul. Paul, who was trained and qualified in all its detail and finer points. It is no surprise that Paul rose quickly in the ecclesiastical ranks and was finally commissioned to seek out Christians and their communities and put an end to them. It was during Paul's journey to Damascus road to root out the Christian community there that he was thrown to the ground, blinded, and confronted with the terrible question, "Paul, why do you persecute me?"

Later it was a member of the very community he sought to destroy that God used to restore his sight. It was such an important event that Paul writes about it three different times. We know that it was this life-changing event that started him on the Christian way. However, for Paul, salvation was much more than one dramatic life changing experience. Far beyond just one saying, “On such and such I was saved”, that one experience was only the beginning of much more to follow. Paul’s greatest gift then, comes from his ability to think and to reflect upon that experience and his later life. So in his letters, Paul expresses his interpretation of his healing and conversion, and the meaning of his new life in Christ. Writing to the Galatians Paul reveals what has happened to him, “I have been crucified with Christ;” my sinful past has been put on the cross, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Paul understood the failure of the law to bring salvation, for God’s law can only do one thing – bring condemnation. That’s at the root, I believe, of our real and legitimate discomfort. Yet it’s in and through faith that we are justified. It’s in and through faith that salvation comes, not by works of the law. It’s in God’s action in and through Jesus Christ that’s the key. In an astonishing way, the interloping woman that we read about in the gospel, this one seems to nudge her way into the Pharisee’s house, seems to have realized this. It’s not the act of subservience that she performed, washing Jesus feet, that makes the difference. It’s in her recognizing who Jesus was and pouring out her love to Him. She makes no request. She does no penance. She makes no amends. She simply bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, and kisses them and anoints them with the oil she brought with her. An act which appeared so sensuous and disgusting only to the warped perception of the Pharisee. But a real act of genuine devotion and the startling foreshadowing of the anointing of Christ after His crucifixion and death.

It’s not the act of the woman, it’s the love she gives and the faith she has and shamelessly exhibits that’s at the heart of her salvation. Jesus points out to the shocked Pharisee that it’s her love, her agape, her service to Him and through Him to God, that’s really at the heart of her reconciliation with God. It’s then that Paul can declare of himself, “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” And I might add, who loved you and gave Himself for you and, just so, for me. Given to us so that we might be justified, reconciled (not by what we’ve done) but by what God in Christ does for us to bring us back into full relationship with God. And that, that my beloved friends, is our salvation.

According to Dr. Roger Alling, the President and founder of the Episcopalian Preaching for Excellence Program, who worships with us frequently here, Paul develops a unique understanding of how our justification and our salvation are related and inform how we live our lives in the present. Paul understands God’s acting in the world in three primary ways. He wrote of what God had already done; what God would finally do at the end of time; and then what God was doing in the present. Paul used three different words for these three different dimensions of God’s action: the past word was justification; the final future was salvation; and the present was reconciliation. Justification was what took place on our behalf on the Cross and in Resurrection of Jesus; that was done way back in the past. Salvation is what’s about to happen when God’s work is done and Christ comes again in His glory initiating the promised new heaven and new earth at the end of time; that will be God’s action in the future. Reconciliation and forgiveness of sin, compassion, caring and loving, is the action of God that goes on now in our lifetime as men and women of good

will continue Jesus' mission, making peace and justice possible in our pained and troubled world. And that, beloved, is God's work in the present.

Roger goes on to state that Paul's ideas about these three dimensions of God's redemption are related to the three primary Christian spiritual gifts we read about in the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Faith, hope and love – do you remember the words? “Faith, hope and love abide, these three. But the greatest of them all is love.” And it is here that lies the key to our understanding of the parable Jesus told his host. The two debtors, remember? one with a huge debt and one with a small debt and both have their debts forgiven. On the surface, that might be taken to mean that the greater one's sins are, the better one's salvation is. But what Paul is actually saying is this, that God's forgiveness produces love, agape, service, that's produced by God's loving us, not by the law. And the greater the forgiveness, the more likely we are to do loving service.

The faith of which Paul writes is the spiritual gift by which we are justified through what God has done in Christ on the cross and in His resurrection. Hope is the spiritual gift that enables us to look ahead, and to trust in that which we cannot yet see – salvation, God's final victory when God will be all in all and the new heaven and new earth will be reality for us all. And love, agape, is the spiritual gift that inspires us today and enables us to serve in our time as Christ did in his, pouring out a love that has no conditions attached, freely given to our neighbors, no matter who they are or how they live or what they've done. That love is poured out to us and enables us to serve in our time as Christ has done in His.

So when we fear for ourselves, when we fear for those we love, when events befalling us seem so overwhelming and so discouraging, Paul reminds us that there is absolutely nothing we can think of, there is absolutely nothing in the world that has the power to separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Therein is to be found the promise and reality of our salvation.

I didn't have an answer for the two Christian students way back when they were intent on saving me, but Roger tells a story that would have been of immense help had I known it then. Talking of his own college student days, Roger tells of an experience he and his friends had while attending an Episcopal church in Pittsburgh when they were students. The rector of the church was a very dynamic preacher whose presentation of the gospel was so powerful that many students who heard him came to profess faith in Christ. The rector would sometimes meet with Roger and his friends to discuss dimensions of their new Christian experience, and one of his favorite questions for them was, – guess what? – “When were you saved?” Usually they would answer by remembering the experience during or just after one of the rector's sermons (great student strategy). But on this one morning when the rector put his usual question to the group, a student named Andrew took the rector quite by surprise. Andrew answered, “I was saved at about 3:00 p.m. on the first Good Friday in Jerusalem.”

For me, these days, my answer would be on the fourth of April, nineteen forty-four at the hands of the Reverend Kerr in the Presbyterian Church of Middlemarch, New Zealand, when and where I was baptized.

Amen.

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