

## **Salvation: Gift and Assignment** (Year C, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)

### **Luke 17:11-19**

We are here this morning as those who believe that salvation comes to us in Jesus Christ. In some way or another, each of us have felt the call, the claim of Christ upon us, and we are here growing into that salvation.

That word *salvation* means, in the original Greek and Latin, "healing." Our word *salve*, the ointment that you spread on a wound, comes from the same root. To be *saved* is to be healed.

So we have this morning's Gospel, in which ten people suffering from leprosy are healed. They are "saved." Jesus has once again reached out to those in need and made them whole. He tells them to go on their merry way, rejoicing in their new-found health and wholeness.

But that is not the end of the story. One of those who are healed returns to give thanks to Jesus. He is a Samaritan, an outsider, a person who was not part of religious orthodoxy. He comes back to thank Jesus and thanks him by following him.

This second movement is also part of what we name as "salvation." Salvation, our wholeness, is what God does for us on the cross and in the resurrection of Christ, forgiving our sins, giving us the gift of abundant life. But salvation, our wholeness, is also what God does in us as God continues to draw us near and as we continue to draw near to God.

That first move what God does for us in Christ is what the church traditionally called "justification." On my computer, when I "justify" the margins, it means that I line everything up. Justification is when God did for us that which we could not do for ourselves. We sinners were brought in line with God.

But then there is a second move, our "sanctification," God's continuing work in us and for us. So there is a twofold quality to salvation. There is a finished and completed quality about the work of God on the cross. Yet by the grace of God,

there is "more and even more" as well, as we find ourselves drawn daily into the sphere of such love, as we grow in our ability gratefully to return some of the love that has so completely, so fully loved us. Salvation is not a project to be done by us but a gift gratefully to be received by us. Gratitude, responsiveness, becomes a fundamental pattern of the Christian life.

C.S. Lewis, as he explored his newfound faith, observed the Bible's, particularly the Psalter's, insistence that we praise and thank God. He also observed the connection between gratitude and personal well-being. "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude" was the title of a web launch by a medical group. The essay cited thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. So your mother was right when she made you call your grandmother and thank her for the birthday card!

While our "yes" does not accomplish our salvation, our little yes is given a place in the fulfillment of God's great "Yes!" to us in the cross and resurrection of Christ. And the Wesleyan in me suspects that our "yes" will rarely be a one-time, once-and-for-all "yes."

Barbara Brown Taylor says that a friend of hers from Africa chided her and the American church's unwillingness to produce disciples who actually live and act like Jesus:

"All you Americans care about is justification! You love sinning and being forgiven, sinning and being forgiven, but no one seems to want off that hamster wheel. Have you ever heard of sanctification? Is anyone interested in learning to

sin a little less?" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, Cowley Publications, 2000, p. 86.)

God's love desires not only our assent but also our participation. Jesus doesn't just want us to adore him but to *follow* him. We are told by Jesus that we are to take up his cross daily (Lk 9:23). Every day we must wake up, jump out of bed, and be surprised by the scope of our salvation in Christ. Our "yes" thus becomes "yes" again and again, more and more as we grow in grace. In the Lord's Prayer, note that we again and again, as if for the first time, ask God for the gift of our *daily* bread.

Alas, many of us attempt to be mere bystanders when it comes to following Christ. The comedian Flip Wilson used to reply when asked about his religious preference: "I'm a Jehovah's Bystander. They wanted me to become a Jehovah's Witness, but I don't want to get involved."

The sometimes heard, smug, "I'm saved, how about you?" betrays the grace of God as a daily, ongoing, continually awakening and surprising gift of emergent awareness. We are "saved" by the completed work of Christ, yet it is also true that we are graciously, moment-by-moment "being saved." We thus may joyfully anticipate that time, that place when we shall be fully "saved," closer to the heart of God than we ever dreamed or dared imagine. Paul says that he and indeed the whole creation "groan" in agony for such complete redemption (Rom 8:22).

If you've never known what it's like to be offered the gift of love by another person, I'm not a good enough poet to describe it for you. But if you have been so loved, you'll know what the church is pointing to when it describes the grace of God as unmerited, life-giving, life-transforming gift.

But the love of God is not like the first puppy love of a high school romance. It is love for the long haul. It is love that brings us closer to God and refashions us more in the image of God each day.

And that was what that one healed man, the Samaritan, figured out about Jesus. Of all those who were healed, those ten who experienced the gracious healing of

God, only one returned, and followed Jesus. Presumably, on his next day with Jesus, in his next step along the way, this man learned that Jesus was not only a healer of the sick, he was also a prophet of truth, he was a teacher of righteousness, he was a sometimes demanding Lord, as well as Savior. And that's one reason why we remember this man today. He was able to put together the love *of* God with his growing love *for* God. He got not only the gifts of God but also returned to be of service to God.

Once again we hear Jesus telling us not to be concerned with the quantity of faith—whether we have enough to make our prayers “work”, as if faith were a matter of cause and effect. Rather, Jesus is teaching us about the nature of faith. In short, to “have faith” is to live it and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith—this is the grateful sort of faith that has made this man from Samaria truly and deeply well.

One might almost say, in fact, that “faith” and “gratitude” are two words for the same thing: to practice gratitude is to practice faith. If faith is not something we have, but something we do—something we live—then in living we express our complete trust in God. When we practice gratitude, we find that faith is given in abundance, pressed down and overflowing.

To practice gratitude intentionally changes an individual life, to be sure. It also changes the character of a congregation. When Christians practice gratitude, they come to worship not just to “get something out of it,” but to give thanks and praise to God. Stewardship is transformed from fundraising to the glad gratitude of joyful givers. The mission of the church changes from ethical duty to the work of grateful hands and hearts. Prayer includes not only our intercessions and supplications, but also our thanksgivings.

The church has always struggled to interact divine initiative (God's initiating, justifying "Yes") with human agency (human responding, sanctifying, confirming "yes") God's "objective" work on the cross and our "subjective" response.

Being a disciple means a willingness to witness, to have the world look at you and see the ways that you are actually following Christ. Being a disciple means not only to love Jesus but also to follow Jesus.

Jesus did not say, "Believe the following six things about me," or "Follow these ten truths." In the Gospels, Jesus calls people to a journey with him, not a seminar about him. He was a prophet preaching, always on the move, constantly drawing people into his journey, itinerant, truth in motion; not a professor lecturing a classroom of passive, static spectators.

Even when Jesus rarely mentions belief, he isn't talking about a head-trip, a set of cool intellectual propositions. He is talking about an engaging, costly relationship. "Believe in me," he says. Not, "Believe these assertions about me," but rather give in, be engaged, walk with me. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he says. Not, "I am someone who tells you some truths about the way," but rather "I am the way." He is life. So the Gospels portray the disciples of Jesus as pilgrims on the way from here to there, having a hard time keeping up. When he taught, Jesus taught peripatetically, on the go rather than having everyone sit down and quietly meditate.

Jesus' first disciples, when they believed things about him, were usually wrong. The first disciples are not those who had the right thoughts about Jesus but rather those who had the guts to get into the boat and sail with him even when they didn't completely understand him. What does that tell you?

Writer Anne Lamott says her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, "Help me. Help me. Help me," and at bedtime, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." I would add to that the weekly ritual of standing and singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

And that's what I learn from the healed Samaritan who returned to give thanks to Jesus.