

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2009
Lessons: Jeremiah 8:4-6, II Corinthians 5:14-21 and Matthew 5:23-24

RECONCILIATION

For many in America and beyond, the question that defines Christianity and its approach to the world is, “Are you saved?” I wonder if those who ask that question consider how it sounds to people and how it makes them feel. First of all, what is salvation, and what does it mean to be saved? Secondly, when did faith become a matter of certainty about oneself that sounds an awful lot like self-approval, despite all the talk about giving glory only to God? God is not glorified by Christian cockiness. The apostle Paul says he *hopes* for salvation and reminds us that hope looks to something we do not yet see or possess. When does trust in God’s love turn into a done deal? For that matter, when does any love ever turn into a done deal that can be taken for granted? Is trusting someone not a completely different matter from taking the person for granted? How did grace, which by definition calls for humble acceptance of God’s love, become a status the “believer” could brag about?

Let’s go back to the first question, *What is salvation?* We have focused a very broad term too narrowly on the issue of what happens after we die and turned it into a procedure for getting into heaven. If we learn to trust God each day for what comes next in this life, then we can trust God also for what comes next when this life ends. Jesus says, “Put your trust in God, and trust in me, also. There are many dwelling units in my Father’s house. If it were not so (if it were something you had to worry about), I would have told you, but what I have told you is that I am going to prepare a place for you.” So, having trusted God to lead us through life’s problems, we can trust God to take care of the death problem when the time comes. Here and now, the issue is life – the nature and quality of life.

When I speak of salvation in terms life’s quality, I am not talking about the good life: health, wealth, comfort, and pleasure. For biblical faith, life is a relational concept, not a private matter of how much I can take for myself, because life is supremely about love. Sin is also a relational concept. Sin is alienation – from God and other people. We are created to live in a harmony with each other that must be worked out continually because there is always friction between one’s desire and the other’s mood or between one’s need and the other’s plans. But the relationships are meant to have priority over my getting my way, because with God love has top priority, even over survival and certainly over prosperity.

Because life and sin are both relational matters, so is salvation. It must be; otherwise it could address neither sin nor life. salvation is the triumph of love over estrangement, trust over fear and suspicion, and hope over discouragement. Therefore, salvation can never be reduced to a formula that fits everyone in every situation. It is an ongoing interaction with the love and mercy of God, an ongoing deliverance from my false self and my false life, and an ongoing release from all that would drag me down into death and despair.

The particular work of salvation in which God works with us to deliver us from the failures, sins, and hurts of our past I call redemption. “What’s done is done,” we say, and so it is, but what’s done can still be changed *in its effect upon us in the present and future*. No, I cannot change what was done, but with God’s grace I can change what it does to me and makes me do to others.

Paul offers us also another term for the work of salvation. Because sin is alienation from God and other people, the apostle speaks to us of *reconciliation*. In Christ, God brings the estranged together.

I always feel a danger in talking about reconciliation because I’m afraid someone is going to take the message as God’s call to step back into a destructive, abusive relationship, and that’s wrong. Reconciliation with another person counts as salvation only if and when the relationship itself is set right so that both can love freely and live freely. God does not tell us to jump back into the pit of an abusive relationship. Sometimes redemption can happen only in the mind, heart, and soul of the person who has been injured by a bad relationship that cannot be restored and should not be reentered. Only with that warning, do I feel safe talking about reconciliation as the saving work of God.

Paul calls us to be reconciled *with God*, which is primary, but Jesus reminds us that reconciliation with God cannot stand alone. Those who love God must love their sisters and brothers, also, and the Spirit of God never stops expanding the circle, including more people as our sisters and brothers. *So, leave your gift before the altar and go work things out with your sister or brother.*

We must not get too literal. If I had to right every wrong and patch every tear in every relationship I have before I could approach God, I would never approach God at all. And which comes first in time, seeking God or trying to heal the hurts in my relations with others? Jesus is telling us not to practice religion *instead of* striving for healing, understanding, justice, and compassion with other people. Salvation cannot happen in the sanctuary or the place of private prayer if I have no concern for its happening in my personal relationships, social responsibilities, and business dealings. I can’t take care of my soul with religion while leaving every other part of my life to greed and selfishness.

Friday night at our youth group lock-in, I tried an experiment in physical prayer of the symbolic kind. I asked each person to write privately on a piece of paper something she or he wished to be rid of, to give to God and be free of. It could be a fear, an embarrassment that haunts, a grudge or resentment, a hurt or loss, a habit or addiction. Write it on the paper, look at it, then crumple it up and put it into a small chimney-like container used for lighting charcoal briquets for barbequing. Then I took the container outside and burned the crumpled papers.

There is no magic in Christian faith or worship. Any symbolic physical prayer is “just” a prayer. Certainly, a bad habit does not go away simply because I write its name and throw the paper away for burning. I have to follow up with practical steps toward freedom done also as physical prayers. Resentments do not go up in smoke when the paper is burned. But the prayer is made with a physical action to put a little more of me into the prayer than words alone might be able to do.

Being reconciled with God is no simple matter, and the standard formula of confessing my sins and asking God’s forgiveness is not enough. Forgiveness is hard to give and, perhaps, even harder to receive. And what about my resentments toward God or toward life, which is often the same thing? Forgiving sin means overcoming estrangement, alienation, lack of trust and love. The issue is relational; it’s not a business deal or just a pardon. Forgiveness requires turning from that alienation and letting go of it. God laments, “I have given heed and listened, but they do not speak honestly; no one repents of wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done!’”

To go forward and make progress, we need to get over thinking of salvation as a special sort of religious business deal, signed and sealed as a contract for heaven. Our reconciliations with God, with people, and with ourselves need to be worked out in the *here and now* of earth. We need to know God, trust God, and be honest with God and with ourselves, none of which can be done in isolation from other people or from human society. Sure, we need our times alone with God, but then we need to come back into the world of human relations and relationships, of social responsibilities and the seeking of justice for all people.

Salvation is not a matter of *where* we will spend eternity but *how* and *why* we live. Amen.