

THE THREE PATHS TO SALVATION REFORMATION SUNDAY

(10/25/09)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 3:28
Mark 16:8 (The Shorter Ending of Mark)
John 4:19-26

“And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” (Mark 16:8)

This coming Saturday marks the 492nd anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg.

Martin Luther did not intend to cause a schism in the church. His intent was to call attention to several corrupt practices in the church. His major complaint concerned the selling of indulgences to raise money for church building projects, the most notable of which was the construction of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome.

In this church we are always trying to raise money for our building fund. We want to renovate the vestry, refinish the vestry floor, make the bathroom handicapped accessible, landscape the area beside the kitchen and alongside the Highland Street boundary of our property, and repave the parking lot. To raise the money for these and other projects we include a monthly Building Fund envelope along with your pledge, mission, and Deacon’s Fund envelopes.

Like most churches, we also hold fund-raising projects to support the building fund and to cover the operating expenses of our church. There is nothing wrong with doing fund raising; in fact, it is the only way we can survive as a church. The practice of selling indulgences, however, was one of the more flagrant abuses of fund raising in Christian history. It involved the manipulation of parishioners through fear.

In Luther’s time, perhaps even more than our time, people were concerned about their salvation. According to the teaching of the church, people were either righteous or unrighteous, either saved or damned. After they died they either went to heaven or

they went to hell. The people of Luther's time were told that if they did not do what they were supposed to do in this life, after they died they would either languish in purgatory for millions of years or go straight to hell, where they would suffer for all eternity.

Let's think for a minute or two about this matter of salvation. One of the questions that arise is the matter of dualistic thinking. Do people really fall into two categories: the saved and the damned? Is salvation the sole possession of one group of people, one form of religion, and if so, which group of people, which form of religion? Although this type of thinking is characteristic of monotheistic religions, we need to ask whether this is really what Jesus taught.

When we turn to the testimony of the gospels, we discover that Jesus said little about salvation. The word, at least as a noun, does not appear in the gospel of Matthew. Its only appearance in Mark is at the very end, in what is called the shorter ending, in a passage that was probably not a part of the original document. There we read that after his resurrection Jesus "sent out through them [the apostles], from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."

It is not clear from this passage what Jesus means by "eternal salvation." Does salvation refer to this life, the here and now, or does it refer to the afterlife, what happens to us after we die? Is salvation the same as experiencing or dwelling in the kingdom of heaven? If so, is this kingdom of heaven a future state of affairs or, as we read in the Gospel of Thomas, is it a reality which is already spread upon the earth, a reality that we may have simply failed to perceive?

As recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the woman at the well "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews." I'm not sure what Jesus means when he says, "salvation is from the Jews." The five passages in Luke that mention salvation are equally vague or seem to use the word in a very general way.

The verb “to save” as it appears in the gospels, has several possible meanings. When Jesus tells us that in order to save our lives we must lose it he seems to be meant to gain or attain fullness of life. Once again, it is not clear whether Jesus is talking about this life or the next. He may, of course, be talking about both.

According to *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, in the Old Testament salvation carries the connotation of “broadening” or “enlarging” one’s life space. The Hebrews believed that this enlarged life space and the prosperity that accompanies it comes to pass only with divine help. The verb “to save” can also mean to protect or deliver from harm, as when we read that God saved the Israelites from their enemies.

In the New Testament, it seems to me that the concept of salvation refers to the quality of our relationship with God. The word salvation is used interchangeably with justification, redemption, atonement, and reconciliation. The New Testament writers identified God’s intent to “save” or “rescue” us with the person and ministry of Jesus. In fact, Jesus’ name comes from the Hebrew root meaning “salvation.”

Jesus saved or delivered people from various forms of physical, psychological, and spiritual bondage. He restored them to wholeness and soundness. His healing miracles were linked to the person’s faith and involved the restoration of the person’s relationship with God. A “saved” life is a life that is “redeemed” in relation to God, oneself, and community. We witness to this in the prayer of confession that we say in preparation to receive the Sacrament of Holy Community. In this prayer we seek to be reconciled or to experience atonement, *at-one-ment*, with God, with our brothers and sisters, and with the deepest parts of ourselves.

If salvation, as Jesus implies, has to do with reconciliation, and if salvation brings healing and new life, it is an important if not essential part of our religion. In our religious tradition there appear to be three paths to salvation, whether salvation is taken to refer to this life, the afterlife, or both. These three paths are salvation by works, salvation by belonging, and salvation by faith.

Salvation by works is self-explanatory. Since we are alienated from God by our sin, we can reestablish this relationship by living the kind of life that God wants us to live. If we do so, God will reestablish or restore the covenant that was broken through our sin, and we will experience atonement (at-one-ment) with God.

The path of salvation by works underlay the practice of indulgences. John Tetzel raised an enormous amount of money for the building of St. Peter's through this fundraising project. When people contributed generously, Tetzel gave them a certificate that amounted to what the game of Monopoly calls a "get-out-of-jail-free card." The more indulgences you buy, the more certain you are that your soul will not end up in hell or purgatory. As an added benefit, you can also use your indulgences to hasten the process of salvation for your loved ones.

This is a fear-based approach to achieving or obtaining salvation. Luther, who struggled with the matter of his own salvation, knew that salvation by works was not the answer. We can never do enough good deeds to win or earn entrance into eternal life. Luther's confrontation of this exploitative practice in his ninety-five theses aroused the ire of Rome, who responded by excommunicating him.

This leads us to the second path of salvation: the path of belonging. This belief, which is attractive to those who have a propensity for dualistic thinking, maintains that only people from a certain group will be saved. The group, of course, is the group to which we belong. Many Roman Catholics believe that only Roman Catholics are saved. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that all of the 144,000 whom the Book of Revelation tells us will be saved will be Jehovah's Witnesses. Mormons believe that only those who follow the teachings of John Smith will be saved.

Salvation by belonging is grounded in the belief that only those who belong to the correct group will be saved. All the others will be damned. This is why the fear of excommunication was so strong in the Luther's time. If you were ex-communicated, cut off from the communion and sacraments of the church, you were literally damned.

Luther called us back to the path that was proposed by Jesus, Paul, and Augustine: the path of salvation by faith. Luther maintained that God freely, graciously heals the relationship that has been broken by our sin and reestablishes the covenant. In the parable of the prodigal son the son does not have to work his way back into the father's good graces. The father's love is unconditional; he is always waiting to welcome his errant son back home.

With regard to the matter of salvation, we need to make a distinction between faith and beliefs. As John Wesley has said, "Faith is not a belief or any set of beliefs, no matter how true they may be." Faith is the quality of our relationship with God. What matters is not what we believe about God, whether our beliefs are orthodox or not, but the quality of our relationship with God. Faith, which is a gift of God, is a gift that we can nurture, develop, and deepen. Faith can sustain us both in this life and the next.

Jesus helps us reestablish our broken relationship with God. He not only teaches us the new covenant, he is the new covenant. If we know Jesus, we know God, for Jesus is the incarnation of God. In this sense, at least for those of us who are Christian, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. If we walk with him and live according to his teachings, we will not walk or live in darkness.

In four weeks we will be celebrating Stewardship Sunday. We need your pledge and we need you to pledge what you can. We are not trying to build something as magnificent as St. Peter's Cathedral. We are just trying to meet our operating expenses and help our building become a beautiful and hospitable setting for the worship, education, and fellowship that are essential to the life and mission of our church.

If we had a fear-based religion, as in Luther's day, the Stewardship Committee could sell you indulgences. If your pledge was what we reckoned it should be, you would receive a little slip of paper that would shorten the length of time you or your loved ones will spend in purgatory. It might even save you from burning in the fires of

hell. But our religion is not a fear-based religion. We do not believe that salvation comes from good works or by belonging to this church. We believe in salvation by faith.

We are called to be stewards, stewards of our life and stewards of this church. One becomes a Christian steward not on the basis of fear but on the basis of faith. If we have faith, if we have a deep and loving relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, a certain life will inevitably flow from us. Our faith will give rise to good works. This will show not only in our pledge and our commitment to our church, but also and more importantly in our daily life.

Luther calls us back to this central affirmation of the gospel, to this central teaching of Jesus. His teaching became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation and the church tradition within which we stand. It calls us back to the renewal of our covenant with God. It calls us to reconciliation with God through Christ. It reminds us that we are saved by God's grace through faith.

I think Luther's attempt to reform the church of his day was in keeping with what Jesus taught and lived, what Jesus would want us to do as Christians and what he would want us to do as a Christian church. Whether salvation and eternal life have to do with this life, the life after death, or both, it should not be grounded in fear. It should be grounded in the comforting presence of a God who is like the father of the prodigal son, waiting for us with open arms.

It should then find expression in the joyous giving that is our faith-filled response to this relationship, to this very precious gift.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
October 25, 2009*

PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON

Almighty God, we thank you for the religious heritage that is ours. We thank you not only for the words of scripture but the presence of Jesus to guide our thinking, our feeling, and our steps. Out of your grace and love, bring us back to you as often as we wander from the path. Implant within our souls the sacred and imperishable message of eternal salvation. Help us to nurture and deepen the gift of faith that you have given us. Be present both to us and to this church, that as individuals and as a church we might reform and evolve in accordance with your will. We ask this in the spirit of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.