

THE THIRD PATH TO SALVATION REFORMATION SUNDAY

(10/31/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 3:19-31
John 14:1-17

“Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (Jn.14: 9-10)

Today, October 31 marks the 504th anniversary of one of the events in the Protestant Reformation that has most come to symbolize the reformation spirit--Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the front door of the cathedral at Wittenberg in 1517.

Martin Luther, who was a devout Augustinian monk, did not intend to cause a schism in the Roman church. His intent was simply to initiate a theological debate, a dialogue over several practices in the church that he saw as corrupt, as not being true to the spirit of the gospel. Luther’s major complaint concerned the selling of indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome.

Most churches utilize a variety of fundraising methods to finance their building or renovation projects, or simply to cover their operating expenses. We ask the members of our church to pledge a certain amount every week, to give us a gift, to write our church into their will, or all three. We also ask our members to work on or support our various fund-raising projects. We invite you to share your time, talent, and treasure with us and with the world through us. The practice of selling indulgences, however, was one of the more flagrant abuses of fund raising in history. It involved the manipulation of parishioners through fear.

In Luther’s time, perhaps even more than our time, people were concerned about their eternal salvation. The mindset of that time was dualistic. People were seen as either righteous or unrighteous; they were either saved or damned. After people died, they either went to heaven or they went to hell. The people of Luther’s time were fearful of falling into the wrong group. If they did not do what they were supposed to do in this life, after they died, they would either languish in purgatory or go straight to hell, where they would suffer for all eternity.

If we are to understand Luther’s complaint against the church of his day, we should try to understand what it means to be saved. We could begin by challenging the dualistic thinking that characterized both Luther’s time and ours. Do people really fall into two categories: the saved and the damned? Is salvation or the path to salvation the possession of only one religion, and if

so, which religion? Although this kind of dualistic thinking pervades all three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is this what Jesus taught? Is it true to the spirit of the gospel?

From recorded scripture, we find that Jesus said little about salvation. The word as a noun does not appear in the gospel of Matthew. We find it at the end of Mark where, after his resurrection, Jesus sent out through the apostles “the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” However, neither Jesus nor Mark explains what eternal salvation means. Does it refer to this life or to what happens after we die? Is salvation the same as being in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven? If so, is the kingdom of God a future state of affairs, or is it, as Jesus said, a reality which is already spread upon the earth, but we do not perceive it?

As recorded in the 4th chapter of John, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” It seems to me that this statement is characteristic of the period in Jesus’ ministry when his focus was primarily saving “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” when he saw himself as the Messiah for which Israel longed rather than the eternal Christ. What he said to the woman seems to fall into the category of a dichotomizing statement. Jesus seems to be saying that only Jews know what it means to worship rightly, and only Jews are saved. The five passages in Luke that refer to salvation are also vague. Even in those passages where salvation is used as a verb, it is not clear what it means. For example, Jesus tells us that if we are to save our lives, we must die. But save our lives from what? Die to what?

The Old Testament witness to a God who saves or protects the Israelites, who provides them with an enlarged life space and prosperity, later became identified with the person and ministry of Jesus. Jesus came to be seen as the one who rescues and saves, the one who redeems us and reconciles us to God. In fact, Jesus’ name comes from a Hebrew root meaning “salvation.”

As we have heard in the passages we have considered from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus delivered people from various forms of physical, psychological, spiritual, and demonic bondage in this life. He restored them to wholeness and soundness. His healing miracles often restored the healed person’s faith in God; it restored their relationship with God. In this context, a “saved” life is a life that is “redeemed” in relation to God, oneself, and community.

If salvation, as Jesus implies, has to do with reconciliation, and if salvation brings healing and new life, salvation is important! In our religious tradition there are three basic paths to salvation, whether salvation is understood as referring to this life, the afterlife, or both. These three paths are salvation by works, salvation by belonging, and salvation by faith.

The first path is salvation by works. If we have become alienated from God through our sin, our disobedience of or rebellion against God's laws, we can overcome this alienation by living a better life. Salvation by works tells us that if we obey God's laws and help those in need, God will reestablish or restore the covenant that was broken through our sin.

The sale of indulgences offered people the opportunity to be saved by good works. If you contributed to the building of St. Peter's Cathedral, which was a good thing to do, John Tetzel would give you a certificate that amounted to what Monopoly calls a "get-out-of-jail-free card." The more indulgences you bought, the more certain you could be that your soul would not end up in hell or purgatory. You could also use your indulgences to ensure or hasten the process of salvation for loved ones.

This is a fear-based approach to obtaining salvation, and a fear-based approach to fundraising. Luther, who was tormented by scrupulosity, knew that salvation by works was not the answer. Luther knew that we can never do enough good deeds to earn entrance into eternal life. Luther's confrontation of this exploitative practice in his ninety-five theses, not surprisingly, aroused the ire of Rome, who responded by excommunicating him.

This leads us to the second path: salvation by belonging. This belief, which is also grounded in 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 Christians believe that only Christians are saved. Many Roman Catholics believe that only Roman Catholics are saved. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that 144,000 souls will be saved and that all of these will be Jehovah's Witnesses. This way of thinking is also characteristic of certain Islamic sects.

Salvation by belonging is based on the belief that only God's chosen are saved. If we are in this group we are saved; if we are not, we are damned. This helps us to understand why the practice of ex-communication was so feared in medieval times. If you were ex-communicated, cut off from the communion of the church, you were damned for all eternity.

By the way, when I typed this sermon on my new computer, whenever I typed the word "damned," as in "we are either saved or damned," the automatic correction encouraged me to substitute another word for "damned." It suggested that my use of this word might offend the reader! To think that some people believe that Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple are not doing everything they can to develop algorithms that weed out offensive or hateful postings! I have the feeling that my use of this word in this sermon has probably placed me on a government watch list! But that's not the point. The point is that I hope you're not offended by my use of religious language in my sermons!

Luther called us back to the spiritual path that had been proposed by Jesus, Paul, and Augustine when he affirms his belief that we are saved by the grace of God. Jesus, Paul, Augustine, and Luther maintain that God freely heals the broken relationship and reestablishes the covenant. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the son does not have to earn his way back into the father's love. The father loves his son so much that he welcomes him back with open arms!

Luther maintained that we are saved by faith. This is the third path to salvation. However, we need to remember that our faith is not the same as our beliefs, though they are often confused or conflated. As John Wesley said, "Faith is not a belief or any set of beliefs, no matter how true the beliefs may be." I believe that *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 from God, since our relationship with God was initiated by God, is a gift that we can nurture and deepen. Faith can lead us into the experience of eternal life both in this life and the next.

The German existentialist psychologist Erich Fromm spoke of this understanding of faith in terms of what he called "the question of existence." Fromm believes that the question of the meaning of our existence can only be answered in relation to something greater than ourselves, something we not only believe in, but which we experience as the true, the transcendental center of our lives. He says,

We try to evade the question [of existence] with property, prestige, production, fun, and, ultimately, by trying to forget that we—that I—exist. No matter how often he thinks of God or goes to church, or how much he believes in religious ideas, if he, the whole man, is deaf to the question of existence, if he does not have an answer to it, he is marking time, and he lives and dies like one of the millions of things he produces. He thinks of God, instead of experiencing God.

In this quote, Fromm illustrates the difference between religious beliefs and religious faith. Religious beliefs are cognitions; religious faith is grounded in our experience of God, of the divine, and the quality of our relationship with the transcendent dimension of life and of our life.

In his classic work *The Art of Loving*, Fromm, whom I believe was a psychologist of religion, suggests that if we never find anyone to love in this lifetime, the problem is not the lack of a suitable love object; it is not that no one out there is worthy of our love. It is that we have not learned what he called "the art of loving." I would like to take this one step further. I believe this is also true of our relationship with God, with the transcendent, with the realm of what Paul Tillich called "ultimate concerns." If we do not love God with all our heart, with all our soul,

with all our mind, and with all our strength, the problem is not with God. It is that we have not learned the art of loving.

Jesus' mission, his ministry, his preaching, and his teaching can help us strengthen and deepen our relationship with God. Jesus not only *teaches* the new covenant; he is the *incarnation* of the new covenant. As we heard this morning in the passage from the Gospel of John, if we know Jesus, we know God, for Jesus is an incarnation of God. For those of us who are Christians, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. If we walk with him and live according to his teachings, we will not live or walk in darkness. Note that I said "for those of us who are Christians" this is true; obviously there are other spiritual paths, other paths to God.

To return to our Reformation theme, I would remind you that in less than a month we will be celebrating Stewardship Sunday. We need you to pledge generously to our church. We are not trying to build something as magnificent as St. Peter's Cathedral. We are just trying to cover our operating expenses, take care of our building, and help our church evolve in such a way that it provides a beautiful and functional 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 they did in Luther's day, I could sell you indulgences. If you pledge to the General Fund, you would receive a slip of paper that would shorten the length of time you or your loved ones would spend in purgatory. It might even save you from burning in the fires of eternal hell! But our religion is not based on fear, because Jesus' religion was not based in fear. We do not believe that salvation comes from good works or by belonging to this church. We believe in salvation by faith!

Make no mistake; we are called to do good deeds, to live a good life, to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to us. This includes the world, our environment, and the people who have been entrusted to us, especially the people whom we love. If we have faith, if we have a deep and loving relationship with God through Jesus, our faith will naturally find expression in good works. We will live a beautiful life, a Christian life because there is no other way we can live! If we take on the heart and the mind of Jesus, the Holy Spirit will guide all that we think, feel, say, and do.

Martin Luther calls us back to the central teaching of Jesus, what Jesus called the good news of the gospel. This third path to salvation, the path of faith, which was central to the writings of the apostle Paul and St. Augustine, became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation and the church tradition within which we stand. The third path to salvation offers us a restored covenant with God: it offers us the possibility of reconciliation with God through

Christ. It assures us that we are saved by God's grace if we have faith. Once we truly realize how much God loves us, how much we are loved, a beautiful life will flow forth from us!

Luther's attempt to reform the church of his day was in keeping with what Jesus taught and how he lived. The Protestant Reformation was not just a one-time historical event. As individuals, we are in constant need of reform. This church and the larger church are in constant need of reform. Jesus calls us; he invites us as individuals and as a church to step forward into the new life that is possible in him and through him!

Martin Luther reminds us that whether salvation and eternal life have to do with this life, the life after death, or both, our faith, our relationship with God should not be grounded in legalisms or fear. It should be grounded in the comforting presence of a God who, like the father of the prodigal son, is waiting with open arms to welcome us home!

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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