

THE FOURTH PATH TO SALVATION REFORMATION SUNDAY

(10/29/2023)

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)

This coming Tuesday, October 31, marks the 506th 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 door of the cathedral at Wittenberg in 1517.

Martin Luther did not intend to cause a schism in the church. His intent was to initiate a theological debate over several corrupt practices in the church. 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, like a capital fund drive, to finance their building, to pay off an outstanding mortgage, to undertake needed renovation projects, to build up their endowment, or to meet general expenses. When we have embarked upon such ventures in the past, such as building an addition to house our kitchen, repaving the parking lot, or replacing a furnace, our members and friends have contributed generously—over and above the amount they pledge annually to the General Fund! 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, considerably more than in 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. People believed that after they 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 (as defined by the church), after they died, they would either languish in purgatory for millions of years or they would go straight to hell, where they would suffer for all eternity (which, by the way, is a *very* long time!).

In order to understand Luther’s criticism of the church of his day (and also of our day), we should try to understand what it means to be saved. We could begin by challenging the dualistic thinking that characterized Luther’s time and also ours. Do people really fall into two categories: the saved and the damned? Is salvation the exclusive possession of one religious group, and if so, which religious group? Although this kind of dualistic thinking pervades many

religions, especially the three monotheistic religions, is this true? And is it what Jesus really taught?

Jesus actually said little about salvation. The word as a noun does not appear in the gospel of Matthew. We find it at the end of the gospel of Mark, the post-crucifixion verses that were added on later by someone else. In what is termed “the shorter ending of Mark,” after his resurrection, we are told that 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? Is the kingdom of God a future state of affairs or, 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 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 this means—either what Jesus means by salvation or his statement that this salvation comes only from the Jews. I seriously doubt that Jesus said this, or, if he did, it must have been at an early stage in his ministry, a stage where he believed he was called to minister to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” rather than to all humanity.

The five passages in Luke that refer to salvation are also vague. Even in those passages where it is a verb, it is not clear what it means. For example, Jesus tells us that in order to save our lives we must die. But save our lives from what? Die to what? I’m sure he did not mean a literal death. I do know the importance of the many, many symbolic “deaths” we need to experience to find our true Source, our true Center, to become one with the great Mystery, the great Unity who lives in the world in and through us.

By the way, George Gurdjieff, an Armenian philosopher, mystic, and a seeker of the true path, spent many years in India, Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, and other places conversing with wise men of diverse spiritual traditions. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff relates how when he asked these spiritual giants to tell him about reincarnation, about what happens to us after we die, he found that no one was interested in talking about it. They just wanted to talk about the importance of death in this life, the many micro-deaths we need to undertake or experience to discover our true Self and the Essence that lives in us and through us.

What seems to have happened is that the Old Testament witness to Yahweh saving or protecting the Israelites, providing them with an enlarged life space and prosperity, later became identified with the person and ministry of Jesus, who was believed to be the Messiah, the King of Israel. Jesus was proclaimed to be the one who rescues and saves, the one who redeems his people and reconciles them to God. In fact, Jesus’ name comes from a Hebrew root meaning

“salvation.” However, this way of thinking might not capture the depth and the universality of Jesus’ message.

To be sure, 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, which were often tied to the person’s faith, restored their relationship with God. 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, it is important! In our religious tradition there are four paths to salvation, whether salvation is understood as referring to this life, the afterlife, or both. These four paths are salvation by works, salvation by belonging, salvation by belief, and salvation by faith.

The first path is salvation by works. If we believe we are alienated from God by our sin, we can overcome this alienation by living a better life. If we became alienated from God by having broken God’s covenant, 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 a particular good work—the giving of money to the church. If you contributed to the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral, 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 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 knew that salvation by works was not the answer. 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, the path of 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 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. It appears to be especially characteristic of the Abrahamic religious traditions.

Salvation by belonging is based on the belief that only God's chosen, God's beloved, are saved. If we are in this group we are saved; if we are not, we are damned. This is why the practice of ex-communication carried so much weight in medieval times. If you were ex-communicated, cut off from the communion of the church, you were not only an outcast in your society; you were damned for all eternity.

When I was a graduate student in philosophy many, many years ago, I was beginning to question and challenge much of what I had learned about God, Jesus, religion, and life in Sunday school. From my studies in science and philosophy, a lot of what I had been taught just didn't make sense—and I found I couldn't believe something that didn't make sense (although the church seemed to be telling me that this was what faith was all about). I needed to find or create a theology that was consonant with science, with philosophy, with depth psychology, and with what I was learning about world religions, religions like Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and even humanism and paganism/pantheism.

One of the first books I read in a desperate attempt to avoid throwing away religion as a stupid enterprise, a turning my back on religion that I hesitated to undertake because of my deep respect for people like Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi—and, of course, Jesus, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, and Mother Teresa, was J. B. Phillips' book, *Your God is Too Small*. That book really spoke to me! I realized that my problem with the religion of my childhood and of many religions was not that the religious undertaking itself is stupid, a fool's errand, a psychotic delusion that shields us from facing existential issues like death, like the pain and suffering of life; my problem was that the God that my religion and many religions were trying to sell me was much too small!

For example, in 2 Kings 5:15, Naaman has just been healed of his leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Naaman responds to this miraculous healing by making the following statement:

Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.

Really? If a particular god, Yahweh, is only the God of the Jews; if that God exists nowhere in the world but in Israel, then, in the words of J. B. Phillips, that God is too small. It may be fine for some people. They may find consolation from their belief that they and they alone are "the people of God." But that God is too small for me.

Last week, following the thinking of the Methodist reformer John Wesley, I attempted to distinguish faith from belief. The third of the four paths to salvation is the path of correct belief. This path assures us that if we hold the right belief system, we will be saved.

We have been discussing this in our Sunday morning Bible study of the Gospel of Mark. As I mentioned last week, I recall something that a young man who attended our Bible study said probably twenty or more years ago. He was obviously of the conviction that it is our belief in Jesus that saves us. By the way, he didn't stay in our church very long; he somehow discovered that I am a liberal, and that was the end of his relatively short sojourn with us. He also wrote a scathing letter to our Diaconate telling them they had to fire me because "I was leading their people down the path to perdition."

I like that—no one says "perdition" anymore! Perdition is defined as "a state of eternal punishment and damnation into which a sinful and unrepentant person passes after death." I still remember the Sunday when the young man told our group, "The thing I like about being a Christian is that we don't have to do anything; it has all been done for us. Jesus died to save us from our sins. All we have to do is believe this, and all our sins will be removed from us. We will be saved."

Speaking of perdition, I was just thinking. When I write the word "damned" into my manuscript, my computer spell-check underlines it. If I click on the word, my computer tells me that the readers of my sermon may take offense at my use of this word. I would like to assure my computer that I am not using "damned" as a cuss word, that it is a perfectly acceptable word to use in a religious context, and that my listeners and readers are highly unlikely to take offense at my use of it in a sermon about salvation. They make take offense at other things I say, but not that! Then I thought, I wonder what would happen if I used the word "perdition" instead of damned—which I just did, and my computer spell-check is perfectly fine with it! So, my spell-check can just "go to perdition!"

Going back to our young friend, his understanding of salvation implies that only believing Christians are saved. Once again, I have the feeling that this God is too small. I am also not looking for an understanding of God that does not involve a call to the spiritual journey, to prayer, worship, the deepening of our relationship with God, and the good works that flow from such a life. I can't believe that there is only one path up the mountain, only one path to God. Not after what I have read about other religions, and what they have in common with the teachings of Jesus!

Luther called us back to the fourth path to salvation, the path that had been proposed by Jesus, Paul, and Augustine, when he told us that we are saved by the grace of God. This path assures us that God freely heals the broken relationship. 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 doesn't even forgive him for making a hot mess of his life; he welcomes his son back with open arms!

Luther maintained that we are saved by faith. However, our faith is not the same as our beliefs. As I mentioned last week, 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, but the quality of our relationship *with* God. Faith, which is a gift from God, is a gift that we can nurture and deepen. Faith can lead us into eternal life both in this life and the next.

Jesus helps us strengthen and deepen our relationship with God. He not only *teaches* the new covenant; he *embodies* the new covenant; he *incarnates* the new covenant; he *is* the new covenant. If we know Jesus, we know God, for Jesus is an incarnation of God. If we have a relationship with Jesus, we have a relationship with 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 walk or live in darkness.

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 take care of our beloved building, to help it 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. We are just trying to nurture the wonderful sense of community that we have in this church. We are just trying to provide a safe place where people, where *all* people, can embark upon the most important search of all, the search to find and to build a relationship with that God who is the Ground of All Being.

If we had a fear-based religion, as they did in Luther's day, I could sell you indulgences. If your pledge to the General Fund or your contribution to the Endowment Fund was what we reckoned it should be, 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 perdition, from burning in the fires of eternal hell! But our religion is not based on fear. We do not believe that salvation comes from good works, by holding an orthodox belief system, or by belonging to this church. We believe in salvation by faith!

To be sure, what we believe is important. Our beliefs point us in a certain direction. To be sure, we are called to do good deeds, to live a good life, to be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. To be sure, what Buddhists call the sangha and what we call the church, the community of believers, the transmillennial community of spiritual seekers is important, for it is Christ's presence in the world.

Luther is telling us that if we have faith, if we have a deep and loving relationship with God through Jesus; if we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, our

faith will find expression in good works, in compassion for our neighbor. 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.

Luther calls us back to the central teaching of Jesus, the good news of the gospel. This fourth path to salvation, the path of faith, became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation and the theological tradition within which we stand. It offers us a restored covenant with God: 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 has to flow forth from us!

In the words of one of my favorite bumper stickers: "Christianity—it's not a religion; it's a relationship."

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. Our church and the 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 and through him.

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
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
October 29, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

As I mentioned, in three weeks, on Thanksgiving Sunday, we also celebrate Stewardship Sunday. This is the time when our commitment to our church finds outer expression in our commitment to provide our church with the resources it needs to be the church it can be in the year to come.

There are many guidelines for giving to our church. The Bible suggests that we tithe, that we give 10% of our total income to the church. The United Church of Christ, in its awareness that 10% of a \$50,000 income is a greater gift than 10% of a \$500,000 income, for the latter is left with much more discretionary money at his/her disposal, has suggested that the biblical injunction be adjusted to 5%. Even then, we have no idea how much disposable income our people have, especially in light of the recent pandemic and current inflation.

The Stewardship and Growth Committee will let you know what we actually need to meet our annual budget without drawing down our invested funds. We will give you whatever information we have; then we will trust you to do what you can. This faith-centric approach to stewardship has worked for many, many years in our church, certainly in the twenty-six years that I have been with you. And I trust it will provide us with what we need not only to survive, but to be the church that God calls us to be.

It is in this spirit that we dedicate and that we celebrate the many gifts that our members and friends share with this church and with the world.