

Salvation and Judgment – Part 1

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
September 23 2012

Luke 19: 1-10

Reflecting on the word, salvation, New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, writes, “Salvation is a loaded word. It carries a lot of baggage for many people. I have been aware of this for a long time, but was nevertheless struck by the strength of its negative associations in an intergenerational discussion group that I facilitated. Half were in their twenties and thirties, and half in their sixties and seventies. Most were committed Christians involved in their churches. The rest were earnest seekers, seriously considering whether there might be something real and important in Christianity.

“For 80 percent of the group, the word, salvation, had only negative associations. Salvation was about going to heaven. Though that might sound appealing, the opposite possibility, going to hell, was deeply alarming. They recalled, even as children, worrying about whether they had believed and behaved as they needed in order to be saved. Salvation was laden with anxiety, subsumed as it was within a fear-based Christianity. For some, the threat of hell had been used in emotionally abusive and manipulative ways to control their behavior. Many of these had left church, often for decades, their feelings of resentment and rejection ultimately replacing fear.

“Most in the group also reported being bothered by the exclusiveness that went with this understanding of salvation. They were told, or absorbed, that only Christians could be saved, that is, go to heaven. And often only the right kind of Christians could go to heaven. Salvation was associated with a sharp division between those who were saved and those who were not. As one person reported, ‘Salvation and smugness go together.’”

Does any of this ring true to your experience? Perhaps that is why we don’t talk much about or even often use the word, salvation, in this church. Just too much negative baggage. I have to say that my experience has too often been that when a preacher talks about salvation, pretty soon somebody is being left out, somebody is being judged as not worthy, not fit for heaven. And yet, there is no denying that salvation is a pretty big Christian word. We hear it on the lips of Jesus. I’m not sure we can just walk away from it. And so, when I asked for suggested sermon topics for this month, a number of you asked to hear more about salvation, being saved, even judgment. And it all proved to be too much for one sermon. That’s why I am calling today part 1. Tune in on October 14th for Salvation...Part II.

But for today...where to start? How about with little Zacchaeus up in the tree? Only Luke tells the story of Jesus entering Jericho, spotting the sleazy chief tax collector and then inviting himself to the man’s house for a sandwich and a beer. Zacchaeus – not just a tax collector, but the chief tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, robbing and cheating his own people on behalf of their oppressors and reaping huge profits along the way. Of all the people Jesus could have stayed with in Jericho, Jesus chooses him, one of Rome’s hated henchmen. And all the good people, the righteous people, the church-going, hard-working people, are left to murmur...“He’s gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” Well, they certainly have that right!

Note that Zacchaeus did not invite Jesus. Jesus invited himself. And, again, the good people of the town grumbled. Who knows, maybe even Zacchaeus grumbled. Our text says that he was happy to welcome Jesus into his home, but don’t you suppose he also wondered, what does this preacher want from me? He isn’t working on a building campaign is he? But whatever he was initially thinking, during the meal Zacchaeus, who knows, maybe after a couple of glasses of Sonoma County chardonnay, gets so carried away that he says, “And just to show you what an honor it is for me to have you in my home, sharing this meal, I’m going to give half of all that I’ve got to the poor, and if it can be shown that I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will restore it!”

It is not hard to imagine Jesus laughing sarcastically, “If it can be shown that you have defrauded anyone? Zacchaeus, get real. You have defrauded everyone and the whole town knows it! You are a chief tax collector. Stealing from your own people is what you do.” But then, Jesus who has taken more than a little wind out of Zacchaeus’ self-righteous sails, adds, “Today, salvation has come to this house...For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

“Today salvation has come to this house...not in some future by and by, not in some heavenly dream, but today, here and now, salvation has come.” Jesus enters into Zacchaeus’ space, might say Jesus intrudes into his space, and it becomes the site for a salvation feast. And even one as morally compromised as a chief tax collector, not only sees a new heaven and new earth, but chooses to join up, to become part of it. Could this be what Jesus means when he speaks of salvation? Not some reference to an after life, not a determination of who goes to heaven and goes to hell, but, it in fact, much as Zacchaeus experienced, finding liberation from whatever is holding us in bondage, find healing and hope and transformation here and now? Could salvation be what happens whenever Jesus intrudes into our space and we find ourselves transformed, finally coming to the understanding that ours is a God who preserves, remembers and sustains us? “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see....”

Years ago, preacher and teacher, Fred Craddock, was on vacation with his wife in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. It was the last day of their vacation. They had stopped at a little cafe for lunch. Well, wouldn't you know, this good ol' country boy, an older fellow, walks in, talking to everybody, slapping folks on the back. Craddock tried to hide behind his menu. "If we don't make eye contact, maybe he will go away." But sure enough, the friendly old fellow came over to the Craddocks' table.

"You folks on vacation?"

"Yes."

"Having a good time?"

"I was until a few moments ago," thought Craddock.

"Gonna be here long?"

"No, this is our last day. On our way home now."

"Well what is it you do?"

Craddock had his answer already prepared, an answer that was a sure fire way of ending any conversation with a stranger. "Well, I'm a professor of homiletics and theology." But this only made the old man even more interested. "So, you're a preacher man. Well, do I have a preacher story for you." He pulled up a chair and sat down, much to Craddock's distress. Trapped!

He began his story: "Yeah, I was born back in these mountains. My momma wasn't married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. We lived in a shack outside of town. The other women in town used to spend their time guessing who my daddy was. I didn't know who my daddy was. That was a real problem back then and I was ashamed. Other kids weren't allowed to play with a boy like me. They said such ugly things to me that I would hide in the weeds at recess, and eat my lunch alone. They said I wasn't any good and would never amount to anything." The old man was weeping now, but he collected himself.

"Well anyway, there was a church in Laurel Springs. It had this preacher with a big booming voice. I knew church wasn't a place for a boy like me. But sometimes I would sneak in on Sunday and sit toward the back so I could sneak out before the service ended. But one day I just got lost in what the preacher was saying. Before I knew it, church was over. The aisles got all jammed up and folks were looking at me. I was making for the back door as fast as I could when I felt this big hand on my shoulder. And a big voice boomed, 'Boy!'"

"It was the preacher man himself. He said, 'Boy!' and I froze. He talked so loud that everybody heard when he said, 'Boy, who's your daddy? Boy, I know who your daddy is.' It felt like a knife in my gut. I wondered, does he really know who my daddy is? But I knew I was about to have my feelings hurt like always and I would never go back to that church again. Then the preacher continued, 'Boy, now let's see...why you're a child of...' he paused and everyone was listening. 'Boy, why you're a child of God, and I see a strikin' resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now you run along and claim your inheritance.'"

Craddock looked closely at the old man. He suddenly seemed familiar. "Sir, what's your name?"

The man replied, "Ben Hooper."

"Ben Hooper? Why I remember my daddy telling me about you – the illegitimate child who was twice elected as the governor of Tennessee."

Old Governor Hooper looked at Craddock and with tears in his eyes said, "I was born that day in the Laurel Springs church."

Today salvation has come to this house. Governor Hooper's experience, the experience of Zacchaeus...this is what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of salvation...when he brings salvation. Is it too radical for me to tell you to forget about heaven and hell, forget who's in or who's out. Let's be done with fear-based, judgmental religion! Salvation is all about the creative, renewing, healing, transforming and hopeful spirit of Christ touching our lives, filling our hearts, opening us to new life and new possibilities...this very day! And that is why we must reclaim this word. Because salvation is to know that God says "yes" to me. And God does this knowing the full reach of my delinquencies and understanding the wide arch of my humanness. And knowing this, you see, trusting this, enables me to say yes to myself and yes to you in all your wild, wonderful and weird humanness. In doing this, we can show the world what life looks like when we open ourselves to the saving power of Christ.

Marcus Borg recalls a time, after lecturing on Jesus and salvation, that he was asked by a perplexed pastor, if Christianity is not about the after life, then what is our product – what is our brand? Borg's response: "Our product is salvation as the two fold transformation of ourselves and the world. We yearn for the transformation of our lives, for a fuller connection to what is, for liberation from all that keeps us in bondage, for sight, for wholeness, for the healing of the wounds of existence. And most of us yearn for a world that is a better and more peaceful place...Salvation concerns these transformations. Who does not want this? This is what Christianity at its best is about. And this is what the religions of the world at their best are about."

"The World is not Conclusion," wrote Emily Dickinson. "A Species stands beyond...Invisible...It beckons and it baffles." The world is not conclusion. It's not over until God says it's over. God's story continues – continues to beckon and baffle. And that is our salvation.