

"SACRAMENTS AND SALVATION"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
January 22, 1984
Ephesians 2:1-10

Do you know for certain that if you should die tonight, you would go to heaven? When you meet God at the portal of eternity, what will you present for admission? Will you say, "I've tried to live a good life, and hope that it has been good enough." That is not a very confident, hopeful stance; there is something missing with those credentials.

How are we saved? How are we made right with God? "I hope so," is a barren, joyless, anxious stance. Craig Venaas and I were comparing grandfathers the other evening. I said that my grandfather Norris was a strict Baptist, and he was sure that no one but a Baptist, especially not a Methodist, would be going to heaven. Craig replied that his grandfather was sure that only Lutherans will make it, and not just any Lutheran, at that, but only the Norwegian speaking Lutherans! How are we saved? Who will be saved? Who will make it? Those who are baptized? Those who are church members? Those who have faith? Can you manipulate the judge, the creator of the universe, with your faith, your puny faith? How about the days when you are depressed and don't have faith? Then what happens?

The gospel - the good news - is succinctly stated in our lesson today, Ephesians 2:8, where Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." There it is, so simply stated, so profound in meaning, so difficult for moderns to grasp. You are saved by God's act, by God's grace. Grace is the boundless, limitless love of God. God acted on your behalf. He came to the world in the son, Jesus. Jesus lived, taught, died and was raised again. Whatever price had to be paid, whatever admission was required, whatever ticket had to be purchased, Jesus did it all. Your response is faith, and Paul is clear, even your faith, your ability to believe in Christ, is a gift from God. When your experience is such that you don't feel saved, when your faith is not strong, then you trust in God's act. Your salvation is not dependent on your faith, but on God's grace.

The response, your part of the covenant which God makes with you in Jesus Christ, is to trust and commit your life to Christ, to live as Jesus taught us, to work and serve the world as Jesus did, out of gratitude for your salvation. To work, to serve, to live as good a life as one can, is done not to earn salvation - not to say to God at the portal of eternity, "Oh, God, look how good I've been, now let me into heaven." To work and serve is done out of gratitude to God. When we meet God at the portal of eternity, you hold the admission ticket which says, "Bought and paid for by Jesus Christ." God's grace is the entry into eternity. Good works is the response in gratitude. Trust in God's grace is the sustaining force that keeps you hanging in there, even when you don't feel it, or when your faith wavers.

Now, what is the relationship between salvation and the sacraments - baptism and communion? The sacraments are, first of all, the demonstration of salvation. The sacraments are the dramatic acts. The word "sacrament" means, "sacred act". The sacraments in themselves are not magical rites, do not, in themselves, automatically bring salvation, but they are more than symbols. They are dramatic acts.

Baptism is packed with symbolism. Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It is the participation in Christ's death and resurrection. In baptism, one dies to the old life and is raised to new life in Christ. Baptism is the act of washing away sin. Baptism dramatizes new birth; as a baby is born in water, so the second birth is accompanied with water. Baptism dramatizes the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism. Baptism is the act of being received into, being born into, God's family.

Communion is the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of salvation is dramatized in the breaking of the bread, the pouring of the wine, dramatizing Christ's supreme sacrifice when his body was broken, his blood was shed, for the salvation of the world. As John the Baptist exclaimed in our Gospel lesson today, John 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." In Communion, we remember the last supper and the death of Jesus; but we more than remember, we experience.

In fact, secondly, the sacraments are also means of grace. They not only dramatize God's act of grace, they express, communicate that grace. God uses the sacraments in a unique expression of grace. We may receive God's grace, the gift of salvation, other than through the sacraments, but the sacraments are special. John Wesley called them "means of grace". God communicates the gospel to us in vivid, dramatic, sensual experiences of water, tasting bread, drinking or tasting juice. Salvation, God's love for us, is communicated on a deeper level than words can express.

Look at it this way. God communicates not only with our heads, but also with our hearts, through the sacraments. Most of us need more than an intellectual understanding, more than a head trip. Intellectually, we hear sermons, read books, mother lectures, teacher instructs; but for an understanding that affects behaviour, more than words, more than an intellectual understanding is essential. Not only the left side of the brain - the rational, logical side - needs to be addressed; but the right side of the brain as well - the emotional. The sacraments are not easily explained in theological language, because the sacraments are speaking to the heart, the right side of the brain, the emotions.

For example, husbands, you can say, "I love you", to your wife, (usually under pressure because husbands assume the wife know she is loved), and then are baffled because she wants more. Your wife believes you love her but there is still an insecurity there. She wants more assurance. What is happening? Many of us husbands operate on the left side of the brain; we are rational, logical, and neglect the emotional. A wife wants more than an intellectual, left side of the brain, understanding that she is loved. She needs a little romance, some affection, a rose, an invitation to dinner and the concert, moonlight, soft candlelight and music. She needs a necklace, or a gift just for her, not something for the kitchen! I heard of one husband who gave his wife a birthday gift of a new lawn mower! Because of our church's location here in the Silicon valley, we have an abundance of engineer type husbands. Engineers, scientists, mathematicians, note: it is not easy to live with you! You are cerebral types, you tend to act and feel through your head, not your heart. Maybe you don't need flowers, tenderness, soft music, but most of the world does, including many of your wives! Sometimes, it is not much fun to work with you either!

Your salvation - God's gift, by grace you have been saved - is communicated intellectually to you via the left side of the brain through sermons, books, classes. And your salvation is communicated, expressed, emotionally to you via the right side of the brain through the sacraments. They speak to the heart. Emotionally, you receive the assurance that God loves you, that you are saved, you belong to God, through the water of baptism, the bread and wine of communion. You can feel the water, you can hear it poured, you can see the bread broken, you can taste the bread and wine, you walk in fellowship with your brothers and sisters in the church, you are told as you partake, "God loves you". Sacraments are more than symbols, they are dramatic acts and means of grace, communicating to you on the emotional level.

One more analogy: Susie is a fortunate girl. She is being reared in a family where she is loved, honored, respected, accepted. Susie knows she is a Jones girl, that she belongs in the family. She doesn't need to do antics to get attention and assurance that she is somebody. She knows in her head and in her heart, left and right sides of the brain, who she is. She doesn't need to try so hard to be a good

little girl in order to be loved by her mother. She is assured of belonging, she is relaxed in the relationship, she is proud of her family, and wouldn't think of embarrassing her family. She does her best because she is a Jones girl, not forcing herself, because she is relaxed and happy. But, sometimes she feels depressed. She has those days we all have when she wonders, she doubts. She needs tangible signs of her identification. On those days, she goes to the kitchen and gets a hug from mother. She sits on Dad's lap and kisses him. She gets out the family album and looks at the pictures. She remembers her grandparents. She sees herself when she was little. She asks to be told the old stories of what she was like as a baby. She looks at her birth certificate, or her adoption certificate, and relaxes again, knowing she is loved, knowing she is indeed Susie Jones and she belongs.

That is the relationship of sacrament to salvation. A Christian is one who knows he/she is loved by God, is accepted, received by God. You do not earn salvation by being good, or by doing antics to get God's attention. You know that you are saved by God's grace, God's gift, and relax, trust in that love. You don't do good works in order to be saved, accepted by God, but you do good works because you are proud of God's family, and live in such a manner to bring credit to the name of Christian. On those days when you doubt, wonder, are depressed, and need assurance, need a sign of identification; then, remember your baptism, look at your adoption certificate, get a hug from God through Communion, and prayer, and relax again, knowing that you are saved.

Have you claimed your baptism? Have you responded in trust and obedience to God's salvation? Do you know you are saved? Do you know for certain that if you should die tonight, you would go to heaven? "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God". Ephesians 2:8.

"SACRAMENTS AND
SALVATION"

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 22, 1984