

Path To Salvation

3:1-7, 14-21
March 18, 2012

I.

What if a very wealthy person announced that everyone who is a member of St. Thomas on April 6, 2012 would have all their debts paid in full? It wouldn't make any difference whether it was a mortgage, car loan, credit card bill, or anything else. If you belong to St. Thomas on that day, next April 6, everything will be paid for you, no strings attached.

Do you think our membership would increase? Would people want to belong to our church? We probably couldn't hold everybody who wanted to get in the doors. For the rest of the month it could be a different kind of March Madness.

And if you are thinking ahead about the calendar, you will find that April 6 is Good Friday. It's the day we recognize that someone did, in fact, pay our debts in full. Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay our debts of sin for all time. All that people have to do is accept Jesus in that way.

Are people as excited about Good Friday as a spiritual payday as they would be about a financial payday? Are they beating down our doors to get in because of Good Friday? Is it possible that human nature leads us to worry more about staying out of bankruptcy than staying out of hell?

And doesn't that raise an eternal question? Why isn't the Gospel message taken more seriously? There might be several reasons. Maybe people are not clear about what the Gospel message is. Or, if they are clear, perhaps they don't believe it. Or, if they do believe it, they might think they can deal with it later.

There's only so much I can say about all that today. But a good place to start is with the clarity of the Gospel message itself. Today's reading from John doesn't mince any words. It's one of those biblical stories some people want to avoid because it's not open to the interpretation they want to give it. That's because it's either true, or it's false. There is no middle ground.

I once heard an old preacher say that today's Gospel is about whether we will spend eternity in the smoking section, or the nonsmoking section. And while those might be clever metaphors, this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus goes right to the core of our Christian beliefs.

II.

The reading begins with Jesus being questioned by Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee. Pharisees, as we recall, comprised the Jewish sect that often challenged Jesus and his ministry. Perhaps that's why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He didn't want his Jewish colleagues to see him.

Nicodemus also was more user-friendly than other Pharisees because he accepted that Jesus came from God, and his miracles were of divine origin. Later in John's Gospel he spoke up for Jesus to other Pharisees (7:50-51), and helped bury Jesus' body after the crucifixion (19:39).

But in today's reading Nicodemus had some questions about Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. And he received an explanation that defined three principles inherent in our Christian hope.

First, we must be born from above to enter the kingdom of God. Second, God loves us so much that he gave Jesus, his only Son, that we might live forever in God's presence. And third, people who do not accept Jesus in this way are condemned to judgment. There is good news and bad news. Let's look at each in more detail.

III.

First, the good news. We begin with being "born from above." Some Bibles, including the King James version with which many of us grew up, translate that as being "born again." Both are correct. John wrote his Gospel in Greek, and he used a Greek word with no English counterpart that could mean either born from above, or born again, or both.

This confused Nicodemus, and he asked how a person's mother could give birth to the same person twice. Jesus, however, was speaking of spirituality rather than actual childbirth, and explained that we must be born of both water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom.

Being born of water is easy to understand in the context of our own baptisms. Spiritual birth, however, comes after baptism, and occurs when we experience a saving faith. It happens as we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Our belief takes root, the Holy Spirit shows forth through us in our lives, and we are born again not physically, but spiritually.

And this transformation can occur in a moment, or develop over time. It can be like getting soaked right away in a heavy rainstorm, or else like standing in a slow drizzle and eventually getting just as wet. But Jesus said it must happen one way or the other to enter God's kingdom.

The next part of our reading stands as the basis of our faith. Jesus spoke what could be the most famous words in the Bible. We see them on signs at sporting events. They're on bumper stickers, coffee mugs, license plates, and tee shirts. Sometimes it's just the numbers; 3:16.

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Hear it again, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

And belief necessarily means faith. Belief that Jesus died for us is the same as faith that he died for us. Belief in things that cannot be proven by known standards also is faith. Scripture tells us, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Paul also said that faith is God's gift through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:9). It comes through God's grace. We cannot manufacture or create it through our own efforts other than to respond in humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation in Christ.

And acceptance means not only perceiving in our heads, but also receiving in our hearts. We can start with our heads by making decisions to open ourselves to Jesus. We can decide to read the Bible, be part of a church, or help others in need. That's a start.

But faith also grows in our hearts when we open them to the Lord. Through God's grace we receive a life-giving energy that works within us as we acknowledge what Christ did on the cross. The Holy Spirit fills us and we are changed. This assures us of our eternal destinies, and leads us to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life now.

IV.

But there's also another side of the coin. And that is the potential bad news; the frightening dark side of the otherwise joyous message of the Gospel. What happens with people who do not believe? Jesus said that although he did not come to condemn the world, but to save it, nevertheless all who do not believe are condemned by their own failure to accept him.

And sermons about judgment and condemnation are not fashionable in some churches. As Christians we want to feel good. We want to believe that God loves us, and that our salvation will be found entirely in his love. And if you are visiting for the first time today, please know that God does love you and because of that love freely offers salvation in Jesus Christ.

But what if that offer is not accepted? What if it is disregarded, or put off until it's too late? As I just said, even though Jesus said that God's purpose is love and salvation, not judgment and condemnation, there are eternal consequences for turning away from faith, or even coming to church but taking faith lightly.

For example, faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes our way. Faith is not a light switch to be turned off and on when convenient. And it's not like an insurance policy, something to have just in case everything we hear in church turns out to be true.

Faith instead acts in our lives by causing us to believe truths about God for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because we cannot touch or see or fully understand them. And these realities include God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, and God's absolute trustworthiness in fulfilling that promise. That's the truth of John 3:16.

But, you might ask, how can I know that my faith is real if I still don't do all that God wants? How can I truly have faith if I don't always obey God's law?

St. Paul addressed this in the Book of Romans. He said, "No one [is] righteous by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (3:20-22).

There it is. We make mistakes and will continue to do so. And while we are called to try our best to follow God's laws, our salvation is not based upon that. Instead, it comes through faith in our Lord and Savior. And if we truly have faith, our best will be good enough.

V.

So, where do we find ourselves? Is it in the confusion of Nicodemus, or do we have a better understanding of what Jesus meant? I pray that we accept Jesus' words as he intended, and have committed ourselves to him.

But if anyone has questions, please don't let them rest. Come visit with me or talk with others in church. Read scripture again. Pray, by yourself or with others. It's natural to have doubts and uncertainty, but we also want to find some certainties to replace those doubts.

Nicodemus had an excuse. When he met with Jesus the New Testament had not even been written. Jesus was still alive. The crucifixion and resurrection were in the future. There were no Bible studies, no Sunday Schools, and no Christian Education courses like we have now. The church had not yet been formed to help teach God's Word.

And that was part of Nicodemus' problem. He was not able to see how it all fit together. And it was not all his fault, because the big picture had not yet been painted. Today, however, we all know better. We have over two thousand years of knowledge, tradition, and guidance that was not available to Nicodemus.

And while many things in the Christian faith are mysteries or cannot be explained in rational terms, today's story of salvation is clear. We might not know the details of what the next world will be like, but we do know what has to happen in this world for us to get there. *Amen.*