

Sermon Title: The Being-Saved Community
Sermon Text: Philippians 2:12-15
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Immanuel Baptist Church
Chuck Queen, Pastor

John Killinger has written a little book titled, *The Changing Shape of our Salvation*. He begins the book with a story. In 1972-73 Killinger served on a committee of the National Council of Churches chaired by Dr. David Randolph of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship in Nashville. They were charged with studying the meaning of salvation in the modern world. They had three or four meetings, at which various papers were presented and they talked at length. But in their final session, just before they would give their report to the World Council of Churches, Dr. Randolph, in addition to the usual theologians and pastors present, invited a contemporary artist from Florida State University named Walter Gaudnek. They convened at Rehoboth Beach in Delaware.

During one of the afternoon sessions they all met at a particular dock, where Gaudnek had planned a “happening” (that’s what it was called). The plan was for several members of their group to man several small dinghies and row them out into the harbor. Then circling clockwise, they would hold aloft several signs or banners that had been prepared for the occasion, all pertaining to the subject of salvation. Gaudnek himself, would remain on the dock, directing and videotaping the happening.

Two things that happened that they hadn’t prepared for. One, there was no experienced rowers in the group and maneuvering the dinghies was not as easy as it looked. The other was that the coast was just then being struck by gale-force winds in advance of Hurricane Agnes, and winds were kicking up three and four foot waves inside the harbor. Well, you can imagine how this turned out. Killinger said, “Our whole attempt was a farce.” It was a comedy of errors. One man actually fell out of his boat and had to be rescued. Some of the old sailors sitting around the dock watching this whole thing unfold laughed until their sides hurt.

Following that comical episode they packed up and followed Gaudnek to a little old dilapidated sea shanty. They had gotten permission to paint it. Gaudnek had brought several dozen cans and half-cans of paint, all different colors and a shopping bag full of brushes and rollers. He had arranged for a professional saxophonist who taught jazz at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, to play while they painted. A couple of boys on bicycles rode by and joined the group.

That evening several members of the group went to dine at a seafood restaurant. As they entered, some of the old sailors who had been sitting on the dock that afternoon recognized them. There they were pointing and laughing as they relived the fiasco at the harbor. They

had a great time telling their friends about it. When the group reassembled after dinner Gaudnek set up a projector and replayed the videotape of the afternoon in the harbor and painting the old sea shanty, and they had some great laughs.

Then Dr. Randolph introduced a newcomer to the group, a young Pentecostal preacher and professor of homiletics from New York, Dr. James Forbes, who would later in his career pastor the prestigious Riverside Church in New York, leaving his Pentecostalism behind. Forbes spoke up. "I have a question. Just what does all of that stuff on the tape have to do with salvation." Some others were wondering that too. And just then, an energetic little nun attached to the National Council of Churches office in New York chimed in. She said, "Don't you see. It all has to do with salvation. Before we came, that was just an ordinary harbor, like every other harbor along the coast. We made it come alive, simply by being there and doing what we did. You saw the faces of those men from the dock. They will never forget us and what we did. We transformed the harbor. We also transformed the little house by the sea. It was a dying old shack, falling apart. And we brought color and life and vibrancy to it."

Killinger says, "I'm not sure Forbes was persuaded, though it was a great speech. And the little nun was right. We had made a difference." Killinger writes, "I realized, perhaps for the first time, what vastly divergent views people hold of salvation." Forbes saw it in the traditional way while the nun, with all her vivacity, regarded it in a different way. The nun focused on the way it brought the group together and the difference they made in the community, which is similar to the way Paul uses the term in this passage.

How we understand salvation has a lot to do with the presuppositions and perspective we bring to it. Actually Paul himself speaks of salvation in different ways. He refers to salvation in some contexts as a past event, in other contexts as a present process that is incomplete, and at other times as a future hope and reality. He applies the concept to individuals, the church as a faith community, the whole world, and to creation itself. In Romans 8 Paul speaks of creation itself subject to decay and death longing for its future liberation and wholeness.

Here in this passage Paul is speaking to the church as a community, not to individual Christians. And he is thinking more broadly about the unity and maturity and wholeness of the church as a community of divine love and grace. He is saying, "As a faith community work out your salvation, work toward reconciliation and maturity in love, work together as a community of faith toward the goal of unity and wholeness."

And do this, he says, with "fear and trembling." This does not mean in fear of the punishment of God. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul tells them that he came to Corinth "in weakness and in fear and trembling." What he is saying is that when he came to Corinth he came with respect for the inhabitants of Corinth and he came in humble

acknowledgment of his own weakness and dependence upon God and their reception of him and his message. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul mentions how he sent Titus to the church to instruct them and they received him with fear and trembling. That is, they respected Titus as a co-worker and representative of Paul and the gospel and they humbly received his instruction. Paul is saying, “Work together as a community of Christian love in service to one another and the world, and do this in humble awareness of your sins and weakness and in humble trust in God and each other.”

And of course one way you do that is without grumbling or arguing as Paul says in the passage. Paul envisions a community free of fear and greed and prejudice and jealousy, free of all the destructive powers that can divide destroy a community.

This is a good word for the church today. Working out our salvation means being free of all the destructive forces that can divide and destroy us, that can separate and alienate the church community. This should be our goal: To work together for reconciliation and unity, not only for us, but for the larger community and for the world. And we do that with “fear and trembling,” with respect for one another and in humble awareness of our own weaknesses and failures and humble dependence and trust in God and in each other.

And lest we think that we are on our own, that this is an impossible task, Paul assures us—God is at work in your midst, in the faith community inspiring desire and empowering action. This is liberating for a pastor, because that means we don’t have to worry about the church. We are to do what we can do and leave the rest to God. And this is true for you as well. We can trust the church to God because God’s power, the power of love and forgiveness, the power of grace and goodness, is at work in the community.

Fred Craddock recalls a time when he was preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the church of Martin Luther King, Sr. and Jr. Joe Roberts, the pastor invited him to preach and the service had moved to the point where he was to stand and speak. Fred moved to the pulpit, opened his New Testament—they had asked him to read his own text—and turned to Mark 8. He was about ready to read when Joe Roberts, the pastor who was seated up front began to sing. Just as Fred was about to say his first word the pastor started to sing, “I feel much better now that I’ve laid my burdens down,” and then he sang some more. Then the associate pastors started singing, and the musicians went to their instruments, the piano and the organ and drums and electric guitar, and the people started singing.

And Fred’s standing there with his New Testament open to Mark 8. Then he realizes he is the one up front and the leader in all this and so he sets his Bible down and starts clapping his hands and singing too. Then everybody stood up and started clapping their hands and swinging and singing, and “it was just marvelous,” said Fred. Then at a certain point, Pastor Roberts put his hand out, it got quiet, everyone sat down and Fred started preaching.

Fred said, “I could have preached all day.” Afterward Fred said to Joe, “Well, that kind of shocked me a little bit. You didn’t tell me you were going to do that.” The pastor said, “Well, I didn’t plan to.” “Then why did you do it?” asked Fred. And he said, “Well, when you stood up there, one of the associate pastors’ leaned over to me and said, “That boy’s going to need some help.”

Well, that’s true for all of us and that’s true for the church. And we are given the grace we need. God is at work, (the word that Paul uses here is a strong word), effectively, dynamically, redemptively (we get the word “energy” from this word) in the church bringing the church to wholeness and to completeness in love. Of course, we haven’t arrived. We are in the process of becoming what God has called us to be. We haven’t reached the goal. But we are working it out as God works in us, both individually and in the community.

The “salvation” of the community that Paul talks about here is a partnership. Nothing will come of us apart from God’s grace and Spirit. But God does not do for us what we must do ourselves. If we do not apply ourselves, expend energy, exercise discipline, extend diligence, and give our best effort at loving and caring and serving one another and our world we will not progress toward the goal of community wholeness and love.

When we do this well, when we work it all out with respect for one another, in humble recognition of our own failures and weakness and in humble dependence upon God’s grace, supporting and listening to each other, teaching and encouraging one another, and loving and serving our world together, then as Paul says, we shine like stars in the sky. We offer the world a glimpse of God’s new world. We become a breath of fresh air amidst the world’s pollution. Amidst the brokenness of the world the church becomes a place of healing—a place where people learn how to forgive and love and be more compassionate.

I suspect that if we went to all our members and asked people, “Are we that church?” Some would say “yes”; others might say, “no way.” And both groups would be right. The church is always in process—and so even as we become a place of healing and transformation, we stand in need of healing and transformation. Within our own faith community we battle the forces of sin and death, the forces that fragment and fracture individual lives, faith communities, and whole societies.

Will we be able to work it out? I think we will. Because God is at work in this community. Do any of you read the books of Stephen King? I have not read any of his books, but I have watched a few of the films that were derived from his books. Those who are avid readers of King say that the movies do not do justice to his writing. I suspect they are right. But anyway, the other evening Sci-fi channel was re-running a mini-series they did based on his book, “The Stand” and I caught it about half way through and picked up the story line fairly easily. It is a classic tale about the conflict of good and evil, but the interesting

thing in the movie was the numerous echoes and parallels with the Jesus story; there was a devil figure named Flag and a Christ or Savior figure. The Christ figure was an elderly African American woman known as Mother Abigail. One young man, who becomes a part of the inner circle, and plays a vital role is a deaf mute. He is a person of high moral character and a compassionate person. There is a scene where Mother Abigail is talking about God and the role that this young man will play in accomplishing God's will, and his friend speaks up and says, "he doesn't believe in God." And the woman, not surprised at all, turns gently to the man, and says, "That's okay child, because God believes in you." I love that line. God believes in you.

In spite of our lack of faith, our mishaps and failures, our sins and follies, God doesn't give up on us. God believes in us. God wills our good. And God is at work in our lives and our faith community to bring us to salvation, to bring the church to wholeness and completeness in love, to make of us the loving, caring, merciful people God has called us to be.

Dear God,

Forgive us for the ways we have failed you and have failed one another. Help us to apply ourselves to your cause as we serve each other and as we serve our world. May we respect one another and may we be honest and forthright about our own failures and shortcomings. Teach us how love each other and trust each other so that we can offer our world a glimpse of what your new world will look like—so that we might shine like stars in the sky.