

Sermon: Charleswood Mennonite Church

Topic: Church and Salvation (In series on church—my topic being The Church as Saving Community)

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Text: Romans 8:18-30; Psalm 27:1-4

Let us pray. Lord, fill us with the hope and the joy of your salvation. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

In a former time the church was seen as the agent of salvation; even the broker of salvation. "No salvation outside the church" was the slogan. This was a time when saving people was what the church did.

Times changed. The sixteenth century Reformation was hard on the church, especially as a broker of salvation. And for some good reasons. Gradually, the Scriptures became more important than tradition and the individual gained prominence over the corporate body.

Today the church seems to have little to do with salvation. You can hear evangelists say that it does not matter which church you attend, whether you are a baptized member or not, whether you are Catholic, Protestant, or Jew. What matters is your personal salvation. And when the steps to salvation are outlined they have nothing to do with the church.

And in the North American liberal churches the language of salvation has largely been lost including the notion that the church can save us. In this context I sometimes wonder whether the notion of salvation itself may need saving.

There are also other reasons why the church gets distanced from salvation. Many of us struggle deeply with the church's complicity with sexual abuse, gender issues, with indigenous violence, and with the church's underwriting of the state's wars. To name a few things. There are legitimate reasons for being cautious about the church as agent of salvation. And yet . . .

There is a lament. For as salvation becomes individual the church becomes weak and even irrelevant. I say this because then the church becomes an organization to which individuals bring their agenda rather than a body that helps individuals see who they are, that helps to set them free to be beautiful people created by God.

I see the nature of the church as the central struggle of the radical side of the sixteenth century Reformation. The church has something to do with salvation but not everything. Early Anabaptists sought to place themselves between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants on the very notion of the church. On the one hand it was the body of Christ, and as such the body of salvation, where the individual submitted to the church in full devotion and discipline (no salvation apart from the church); on the other hand, salvation was also tied to discipleship and believers baptism because you cannot know Christ unless you follow him daily, and you cannot follow him unless you know him. It was in the binding of yourself to Jesus Christ in the presence of the body wherein salvation had its meaning. It could only be salvation if it was rooted in Jesus Christ and it could only be that if it was part of the body of Christ. Mennonite church theology places the church at the very centre of the salvation story but in a distinctive way.

In our worship services here at Charleswood we often pray the Jesus prayer and say "lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" or, if you like, grant us the power to resist the lure of temptations that falsely promise us salvation; and may we be saved from the destructive powers of evil. This is a salvation prayer and Jesus clearly believed that human well-being is all tied up with God's protection and salvation.

I have come to see that Christianity is somewhat distinctive as the faith of salvation. I have realized this late in life as I became more personally familiar with other faiths like Judaism and Islam. Often I am asked by representatives of these faiths what it means when Christians talk about salvation. How does Jesus save? What does it mean to confess Jesus as personal savior? And what does that have to do with inheriting eternal life?

When I am asked these questions I usually begin my response with the answer that Jesus gave to the lawyer who asked him a similar question as recorded in Luke 10. And the answer is simple enough: love God and love neighbor. But of

course, the devil is in the details. We know Jesus' response. It's important to consider **how** we love God and **how** we love neighbour.

This morning I will suggest three aspects of salvation that I hear in the Christian story and that I feel the church is called to enrich and embody.

First, salvation as healing. It is fascinating to me that when we look at the Gospels, it is hardly possible to read a single chapter without encountering a healing story. Sure, Jesus was a teacher and proclaimer, but he was clearly also a healer. And when he instructs the 70 disciples he says to them, "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The Kingdom of God has come near to you." (Luke 10:8-9). Notice that healing is not only about physical well-being but it is of the very stuff of the kingdom. Wholeness of being, wellness, being set free from the things that keep us under are deep passions of Jesus. In God we can become free from the powers that imprison us like sickness of the body and mind.

I was sick this past year and I learned a lot about what it means to be sick. It's not fun. To a significant degree I lost the capacity to be who I wanted to be. I felt trapped by my own misery, by limits imposed on me by my body. I felt like I was being robbed of a future even the present. It's not only that you have pain and feel miserable, but you become anxious about your own existence, about life's meaning. And you long for healing.

And when you have a community that is there for you, family and church that pray for your well-being, and when they express their love for you concretely in the gift of a prayer shawl, for example, you feel embraced by a power of healing; by a power of salvation. Not everything changes but with such support some things do.

I learned that there can be a kind of healing that can take place even in the midst of illness. This was a hard learning for me, and I could claim it only when I was able to see that my body and my life are not fully my own. I am graciously participating in something much larger than my own life, even larger than family and church, in the very being of God. And since this is so, I was not **all** sick, but only **partially** sick. This does not mean that sickness is not serious or debilitating, it only means that with sickness there is transcendent hope and an already participation in wellness.

Second, salvation as liberation. The Exodus story of slaves being liberated from Egypt, is often seen as the model story of salvation. To be set free from bondage is, of course, basic to any view of salvation. And liberation is really but another form of healing even though there are clear differences. For example, healing usually involves a struggle with natural forces within one's body; and we think of liberation as being set free from human confinements like oppressive social and other structures. Yet healing and liberation are both ways of overcoming bondage.

So it is not surprising that as with illness there is also the matter of whether there can be salvation while still being oppressed. We see this very struggle with the exiles in Babylon as they try to understand how they could be saved in bondage. The prophet Jeremiah says it can be so. How? Jeremiah's answer is "by singing familiar songs of salvation that will indeed sound strange by the rivers of Babylon." You can participate in something other than exile by singing salvation songs, now made strange by a new setting. Singing at the rivers of Babylon feels different from singing at the river Jordan even when the songs may be the same.

People of the church are exactly these strange kinds of people. Sure, we yearn for full liberation and for full healing for ourselves and others, but even while we live in bondage there is a way in which we can participate in the not-yet reality that is still coming. How? By participating in God's liberating being in whom we are being saved.

But to understand this more fully we need a third dimension of salvation. And this one is harder to name. Let's call it learning to love God. Salvation without the invocation of the transcendent ONE is at most partial salvation. Saving acts always participate in God. God is our healer and liberator. It does not matter who the agents are, this person or that person, good people or even bad people, an individual or an organization, nature's way or the way of technology. Our lives participate in God, as do our deaths. This means that neither our life nor our death is fully understood on the basis of what it appears to be. If Jesus is God then the divide between the transcendent and this mortal world is bridged in some way. And if that is so our own being somehow hangs between these two worlds. Our salvation therefore is not only understood in terms of our bodily healing or physical liberation from bondage, but in a beyond that belongs in the realm mystery. Perfect salvation

does not exist in this world. Perfect salvation rests only in God. But the beauty is that we can taste it already now.

Learning to love God is learning to pray with the Psalmist:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

The church is a peculiar place. It pushes us to see our brokenness, collectively and individually, it also pushes us to see our wholeness in the love of God. It pushes us to see our selves and others in our ordinariness at the same time as it pushes us to see ourselves in God’s beauty and splendor. We stand in relation, between our own mortality and the hope of God’s eternal salvation. This is the place that the church invites us to inhabit. This is the very claim that the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 8 when he says that we are being saved in hope.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes about the church in a similar way. He says that we like to think that “the church is essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith and get together to share it with each other and communicate it to people ‘outside’.” The church teaches us to be nice to one another and to those outside our walls. Now, that’s all fine and good, but it’s not yet the New Testament church.

In contrast to this view Williams says that “the New Testament encourages us to think about the church . . . first of all [as] a space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God’s sons and daughters), and what we have to do about the church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly—God, God’s creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of the renewed universe.”

The church is the very community/space where the individual cannot ignore the larger body and the larger body cannot ignore the individual and where both cannot ignore the One who inhabits this space with a given climate and atmosphere; and so it is a space where healing, liberation, and the love of God

actually become one act. When we participate in healing and liberation in ourselves and others, **we are loving God**

“The Lord is my light and my salvation . . .” In Acts chapter 2 the story of the inauguration of the church is told and it is about light and salvation. The spirit comes as tongues of flame. And what happens? People see differently, hear differently, act differently. A new body is formed where strangers become friends. Whereas in the story of Babel a single people who were trying to usurp the throne of God became utterly divided from one another, here in Acts 2, utterly divided people became one body as they begin to see themselves under the spirit of God. A flame of light, the love of God, gave them the power to see difference differently.

Recently I heard again the song by Canadian singer/song writer Leonard Cohen, a song he wrote shortly before his death. Repeatedly, one hears the phrase, “You Want it darker; We kill the flame.” I was struck by the deep pathos in these words. After all, we do not want it darker; we want it brighter. But to want it brighter we need the flame not only as a distant light that guides our steps but as a light that stirs our passions; that renews our hope.

Clearly the church itself does not save us; yet it proclaims and embodies the salvation of our Lord. The church is not a broker of salvation; it is there to remind us over and over that Jesus Christ is Saviour who has come and continues to come.

May we not be seduced by the temptations around us that tell us that the ordinary is all there is; may we be delivered from the powers that seek to separate us from one another, from God, and even ourselves. May our broken lives be healed; may the chains that bind us be broken; may freedom come for all. Deliver us from evil, Lord. Grant us the courage to risk loving you and one another.

Amen