

Sermon Text for August 25, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 23, Acts 15:6-11

“What must I do to be saved: II”

I hope every single one of you is planning on attending for our church picnic today. It is one of the highlights for me of the year simply because it brings the whole family of FPC together in a way that is disarming and relaxing and really highlights the strength that we have as a community.

Today we look at the second part of our sermon series, what does it take to be saved. It wasn't a complicated question and it has an even more simple answer. Believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved. But we saw that many of us come from church backgrounds that pile up legalistic demands and the guilt weighs so heavily upon us that there has to be something that we can do to earn or at least be even more confident and sure of our salvation.

No, you can't. But today we are going to focus on what happened even before we believed, even before we knew God, God first knew us. I John 4:19 states that we love God, why because he first loved us. Every one of our stories is a story of God's grace, some are more dramatic than others. This morning as we continue our journey through the Book of Acts, we come to a moment in the history of the early church where the very doctrine of grace and so the doctrine of salvation is at stake.

READ SCRIPTURE

I hope you get the sense from last week that the discussion and the debate that were taking place in the church were fairly serious. This is a major crisis and the way things were heading it could very easily disrupt the unity of the church. We pick up this week in vs. 6 with the elders and apostles caught up in the discussion. The whole church was involved in this discussion.

Verse 7 tells us that there had been much debate so even the apostles and disciples were involved, again, and it probably went for several days. Finally Peter stands up. Not Paul, not Barnabas. Peter, the leader, the one we love to cheer because he is so much like us, he says all the right things but takes all the wrong actions. He walks on water because Jesus tells him to, but then starts to sink because he is afraid. He tells Jesus he will never turn away from him and he denies him three times. Do you love me Peter could be a question posed to any one of us.

It is also poignant because these are Peter's last words in the book of Acts. We never hear from him again, he disappears from the story. But before he goes away, he gives us one of the central tenets that we as Presbyterians believe in when it comes to salvation. Follow me here because if you hear and understand this then the rest will follow.

He begins by saying: This question as to the salvation of the gentiles and how they are saved was solved by God long ago in chapter 10 of Acts when I had my pigs in a blanket dream, remember when God told me: "What God has made clean, who are you to call it dirty or profane." The same goes for people. The central theme in Peter's message is that God already decided in favor of all people. Salvation is God's work, not ours. Listen to me because this is a very different teaching from what you get in most of these parts.

Start at vs. 7 and hear what Peter says: God chose, vs. 8, God is the heart knower, God testified, vs. 9 God did not discriminate, God purified hearts. He talks about God's work, not Paul or Barnabas'. And Peter's last cry speaks of God's unfailing love for every single one of us, his cry in vs. 11 is that we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Wow! Let me say that again.

So do we believe that. So do we Presbyterians. So do we 187 year old Strasburgian Presbyterians. We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved. Grace, grace is a word that we use a lot in our Christian circles, but I'm not really sure we understand it well. Grace can mean a lot of things to us can't it? Elegance or beauty: she moves with grace. Politeness: he was a gracious host. Generosity: I have a 25 day grace period on my credit card. Mercy, elegance, beauty, politeness, decency and generosity: grace means all of those things. And none of those words come close to defining what the word grace means in biblical theology, or put it differently, in the way that we ought to think about it.

Let me give you a definition of grace that is biblical: It means that God loves us, God does extravagantly good things for us, without our deserving it. In fact ultimate God grace is when God does extravagantly good things for us precisely when we don't deserve it.

Let me give you a biblical example. You know the parable of the workers in Matthew 20. If you don't read it this week. A man goes out and hires workers at 6 in the morning, then 9, then 12, then 3, then 5 and he gives them all a day's wage, a fair

complete days wage. It would be as if there was a start-up company in Strasburg and those who were brought on Friday and worked a single day open up their pay-checks and they received \$1,000. Well by the time it got to the people who started on Wednesday they are expecting at least \$3,000 but they only get that same \$1,000. By now everyone is confused. The Monday people who worked those 60 hours from the beginning of the week open their envelope, and sure enough a check for \$1,000 which would have been fine if the other workers hadn't received the same. Something is wrong with management if the Friday workers receive the same wage as the Monday workers. That's grace.

Maybe another story would frame it in a better perspective. Do you remember the prodigal son who returned to his father? Kindness demanded that the father take back the brat as a servant, get him off the street, give him a job and food and a bed. But the prodigal son got way more than kindness, he got grace. This ungrateful, alcoholic, philandering son who had flushed away half of his father's fortune, was embraced, given the father's best robe, and rings and sandals and had a party thrown in his honor with the special fatted calf as the main course. Did this boy deserve such treatment? Absolutely not. But the father loved him, that is grace.

Grace isn't giving a person a bonus because they did a good job at work. That's fairness. Grace is my boss discovering that I've been ripping him off and, instead of firing me, he gives me a promotion and a raise. That's grace. It may also be stupid, but it certainly would be gracious.

And that's the thing about grace. It can seem stupid to us. It can seem unfair to us. As we watch grace being dispensed to others, we can feel tempted to say: "What a sucker, what a soft touch. Doesn't he see how he is being used? Doesn't she see how she's becoming an enabler?" We usually don't like it when we see grace being lavished upon a person that we know to be a user, an ingrate, a manipulator, a conman. All that seems to be righteous, and probably self-righteous within us rises up in protest until we are that user, that ingrate, that manipulator, that con who is being shown grace. And it suddenly is so different.

Grace is so amazing. And unsettling. And unfair. It is unfair to the good Christian who has been working since the first hour, who has never sold their bodies on the street, or slept with another man's wife, or cheated on their taxes, or done any of the things that the Bible says is bad for us and displeasing to God. It's not fair, that sinners

who have never paid attention to the laws of God should get the same salvation as those who have been faithful to God all their lives.

It's not fair that God doesn't grade on a curve. It's not fair that God doesn't have different doors to enter his kingdom, rusty-hinged, sleazy back alley doors for those who've lived their lives in a sleazy back alley way and well lit, flower lined front doors for those who have always walked the straight and narrow. It's not fair.

In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that there are clearly people here who do not deserve to be in the midst of us, people who are on their way to the kingdom. There is a whole group of people who are so much less qualified than we are to be on that journey, and the management is so incompetent that He allows them to be with us. For the early church it was the uncircumcised gentiles. The grace of God couldn't extend to them.

Who is it here that is unqualified? Who is it, God may be unfair, but we are going to put an end to that and make it fair. Maybe it is the lesbian or gay person in our midst, or the raging bible thumping fundamentalist. Is it those liberal culture embracing tree huggers, or those compassionless conservative Christians. None of them deserve to be with us on the road to God's salvation. None of them belong with us.

It's not fair. That's right. Grace is not fair. It is grace. God chooses to pour out his love and blessing and his salvation both upon the good people who've always obeyed the rules and upon the delinquents who never met a single rule they didn't want to break. Grace that saves the alcoholic and the teetotaler, grace that saves the curser and the one who's never said a nasty word, grace that saves the gambler and the one who hasn't dropped a coin in a slot, grace that saves the prostitute and that saves the virgin who gave himself only to his bride.

There might be some bad folks here today, some who don't deserve a dollar of God's grace. But even to you God says: "You are a part of the world I so loved. You may be a prodigal, but you are dear to me. I have a pass for you. A pass to get you a new life. All you have to do is accept it. That is grace. God's work for our salvation. Amen.