



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“AM I REALLY SAVED”

Scripture Lessons: Luke 19:1-10

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, May 24, 2009.

I am convinced that there are a great many people in the world today, some whom are probably sitting among us this morning, who genuinely desire salvation but have been prevented from finding it because of their own misconceptions about what constitutes salvation and how it comes into a person's life. Still other, especially church members, would admit to being saved if someone cornered them, but in their own private moments they still wonder: Am I really saved? In short, people are missing out on the redemptive work of God or missing the enjoyment of their salvation for no other reason than that they do not know what to expect. Their confusion is amplified by the fact that they have heard friends and acquaintances tell amazing stories about how the Lord intervened in their lives, how he filled their hearts with joy as their burden of sin was rolled away, how he clearly revealed to them through some mystical experience what he wanted them to do with their lives.

Not only that, but they have read with envy and interest the impressive stories of how people were saved performed some miraculous work or dedicated their lives to some noble cause --- the brilliant doctor with a lucrative practice who leaves it all to pour out his life in sacrificial service on some remote mission field; the corporate executive who sells his lovely home, resigns his position, and takes his family off to seminary to prepare for the ministry; the young drug addict and social misfit who turns away from all that as he gives his life to witnessing for Christ in some creative and dynamic new ministry. So people conclude: Is this then not what salvation looks like; some awe-inspiring, knee-bending, heart-rending event takes place in the life of an individual after which he or she does some spectacular new thing?

And if the testimony of friends is not sufficient to lead a person to such a conclusion, regarding salvation, then just add to it the witness of scripture which tells on page after page how men and women are confronted by the living God in dramatic and miraculous ways and are led by him to demonstrate their salvation through all sorts of powerful dynamic and miraculous ways and are led by him to demonstrate their salvation through all sorts of powerful and dynamic ministries. I mean, look at Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the Church, who is blinded as he meets the living and risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Surly he found salvation on that journey. And such a radical transformation takes place in his life that he is given a new name, Paul. And he become the brilliant spokesman and leader of the missionary enterprise of the early church. Or then again, consider Peter. There he is quietly fishing with young Andrew when a young rabbi named Jesus approaches him with authority in his voice, invites him to follow him and become a fisher of men. And eventually this unlikely and simple fisherman becomes the bold and courageous leader of the New Testament Church, dying a martyr for his faith. Or consider if you'd rather, that whole company of disciples gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, who had the Spirit of God poured out upon them and were given charismatic gifts as signs of God's presence and power.

Now give such marvelous the testimonies both in scripture and in life, it is not really surprising that so many folks begin to doubt the validity of their own and begin seeking a more authentic and more readily self-evident redemption. And work of God dimply because they are awaiting some equally dramatic occurrence in their own life, an occurrence which in all probability may never come. Consequently, they

denigrate their own experience which could be just as authentic as the more spectacular, and they ask unanswerable questions both of themselves and of God. Why doesn't God speak to me the way he did to Moses or reveal himself as clearly as he did Paul? Where is my burning bush, my Damascus road? Why has God not confirmed my salvation through some charismatic gift, some super-natural sign? And could it be that my salvation is really only a cheap and fraudulent copy and not the legitimate thing at all?

I am reminded of this Charlie Brown cartoon taken from the little book entitled The Gospel According to Peanuts. We're like Charlie Brown spiritually "if that's the real thing, then why is it that I've got?"

Now if you've ever found yourself bothered by such questions, I would like for you to look with me at the story of the conversion of Zacchaeus, for it is quite different in character from these more dramatic stories I have mentioned and I think it helps us to come to a more balanced perspective on this whole business of salvation --- what it is, how it comes, and what some of its results might be.

Now you will remember that Zacchaeus was the wealthy and corrupt little tax collector in the lovely little town of Jericho. But his position, in addition to bringing him prominence and wealth, had also brought to him the deepest hatred and animosity of the Jewish people. Tax collectors were the scum of the earth and a Jewish tax collector must have been even lower than that. I assume Zacchaeus was Jewish because his name is. It means the "righteous" or "pure one" and undoubtedly it was said in cynicism and derision by his fellow countrymen. "The righteous one indeed," they must have said, "he is nothing more than a traitor, a thief --- no better than a cutthroat, a pagan, and adulterer, a brothel keeper." Oh, Zacchaeus was a sinner, make no mistake about that, and he was both a social and a religious outcast. No doubt it has also been hammered into his head by the Pharisees that the God of Israel would have nothing to do with a man who of his own free will had become a tax-gatherer and that for him there could never be a place in the fellowship of the redeemed.

But I suspect that if Zacchaeus had a difficult time living with others, he many even have had a more difficult time living with himself. Surely he must have known that much of the resentment and hatred directed his way was well deserved. If he had been raised as a Jew then he must have acquainted with the law's prescribed compassion for the poor, yet though he knew better, he found himself continually reaching into the pockets of the poor to enlarge his own bank account. Is it not true that it is very often far more difficult to live with yourself than to live with others, especially if you begin to see yourself as you really are. Oh, Zacchaeus may have had his wealth and his prominence; every child of the streets must have known his name as he walked past them --- and yet he must have been miserable and lonely within.

How many people there are like that today who have been living far too long with a self they cannot respect, and they have seen the years take their toll. As a result they have lost all faith in themselves and they have no idea what to do about it. They are ashamed of the choices they have made, of the courses of action they have allowed themselves to pursue, of the people they have stepped on in their scramble of some selfish goal, and of the depths to which they have sunk. Such, I suspect, was Zacchaeus' state of mental and spiritual health as Jesus came through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem and Calvary.

Sick of the self he was living with and hungering for love and wholeness, he ventured out into the busy streets to see this Jesus about whom everyone was talking. He knew he had to see him and would let nothing stand in his way, not his height, not even the animosity of the crowd which probably took great delight in blocking his path and obscuring his vision. So he climbed a nearby sycamore tree to get a glimpse of this unusual rabbi. Do you suppose rumors of Jesus and his ministry had reached Zacchaeus? Do you think he may just have heard about the Lord's gracious dealings with other tax collectors, the fact that a tax-gatherer in Capernaum by the name of Levi had even been called by Jesus as an associate. Do you think he longed to see a religious man with whom he could relate as a person and not just as a sinner?

Well, whatever Zacchaeus longed for and whatever he needed, he found in Jesus the Christ, “Zacchaeus, you hurry on down out of that tree because I’m going to your house today.” And he did . Now what that simple act on the part of Jesus indicated to that rejected lonely, sinful little man was that Jesus loved and accepted him, just as he was, with all his faults and all his failings. You see, in the Eastern culture, sharing a meal with a person around a table was a sign of full acceptance. To eat with a person is a symbolic way of saying that this person is worthy of my fellowship. The Pharisees were continually harping on Jesus because he dared to feast with sinners. Indeed, the crowd murmurs in protest in this instance too, but Zacchaeus was overjoyed because of the love and interest directed at him by Jesus.

Now tell me, what happened when Zacchaeus realized that he was loved and accepted? I’ll tell you -- he experienced salvation --- a salvation as real as Paul’s or Peter’s or any other person’s. Jesus even announced this fact when he said: “Today salvation has come to this house!” But notice, there were no blinding lights, no voice from heaven, no angel visitation, not even a charismatic confirmation. There was only the profound realization on Zacchaeus’ part that he was loved and accepted. As Reinhold Niebuhr might have said, he “accepted that fact that in Christ he was accepted.”

And he responded to this gift of love and acceptance too --- not because he had to, mind you, not because he was told to, but because in gratitude to Jesus for what he had received he simply wanted to. He resolved to give half of his goods to the poor and restore four times over anything he had in anyway defrauded from anyone, which was far more than even the Jewish law required. The Jewish law stated that if a person confessed to fraud or robbery he was only required to replace what was taken, plus 1/5 in addition. But Zacchaeus was not laboring under the dictates of the law but rather under the dictates of love. And one who truly loves need not be concerned about law for as Paul would put it, “love is the fulfilling of the law.”

I would like to imagine that prior to his encounter with Christ, Zacchaeus saw himself as he was, complete with all this blemishes and his failings, but mirrored in the compassionate eyes of Christ he began to see the man he could be --- by God’s grace. And so he gained a self that he could respect. He was challenged by love and he responded to that challenge.

And what was his response? Jesus did not ask him to give u his wealth as had the rich young ruler nor did he even ask him to leave his business or his home as he did with Levi. For all w know Jesus did not ask of him a single thing. And yet his very love and acceptance challenged him to become more, to become a new man, a new creation --- to live within his old circumstances as the Lord’s man.

So what I’m saying by way of summary is: Salvation came to Zacchaeus’ house when he experienced God’s forgiving love and was challenged by that love to liven in a new way amid his old circumstances. You see, when Jesus left Jericho, Zacchaeus was still the tax-collector, but in no way the same person. Jericho had the same old tax collector, but he wasn’t the same old Zacchaeus.

And what does that mean for you? Well, if you are one of those who has been waiting with increasing anxiety for some mystical and dramatic conversion experience, it may just mean that you have been waiting for the wrong thing! Could it be that God is not calling you to stand on the corner and hand out gospel tracts, or to give all your wealth to the poor, or to leave you comfortable home and job to strike off for some distant mission field. Maybe what God wants is simply for you to accept his love for you and to respond by living for him in the midst of your present circumstances. Maybe what he needs right now is not another preacher, not another missionary, but perhaps a more loving husband, a more conscientious parent, a more patient wife a more diligent student, a more responsible church member, a more conscientious officer, another tenor, etc. I don’t know what God has in store for you --- that’s between you

and the Lord, but this I know --- that can you serve him every bit as faithfully in Charleston as you can in the jungles of Peru, from which some of us just returned this week.

Maybe what this story means for you is that, like Zacchaeus, your salvation may not be characterized so much by blinding lights, heavenly voices, or angel visitants, but rather by a rational and sincere decision to become a new person --- and to become that new person by God's grace right where you are in the midst of your present circumstances. That, my friends, was not only the salvation experience of Zacchaeus, but it is the promise of the gospel for behold, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." I challenge you to become the new creation that you can be, right where you are!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forbid that we should hold out for a salvation of our own choosing. Instead, give us the grace to accept your love and forgiveness and then allow you to transform our lives in whatever way you see fit. For we ask it in the name of Christ. AMEN.