

Salvation

In Acts we read about the formation of a young community of faith, where people are impressed by the powerful deeds of the Apostles. It is rosy as can be, it sounds just about wonderful, well depending on how you feel about sharing all your stuff (and no I'm not about launch into a danger fraught stewardship message). Still, the vision is pretty idyllic isn't it? People being "saved" in bunches, I mean that's still the vision of a vital and rocking church today. There are a good number of "strategies" out there in churchland that tease you with the notion that what we really need to do is look to this early community for the answers about what to do now. It's a tempting panacea to be sure. I may have read some of the books written espousing the virtues of the early days with a certain longing in my heart.

History, however, has a way of throwing cold water on your warm fuzzy feelings. We need to remember that, even as thousands are convinced, converted, or "saved," there were many who heard and saw and decided that it was not for them. On top of that, as time went by, there were divisions and other teachers than the Apostles (Paul being one), there were people who took advantage of the community, there were all manner of problems that needed to be worked out. We don't even get three chapters on before the whole "sharing things in common" ends up costing a couple named Ananias and Sapphira their lives because they tried to scam the Holy Spirit.

We know from Paul's letters and Acts that there was no shortage of trouble, both inside and out in that early community, the good old days never last very long, sin and idolatry are always lurking around the sheepfold. Which brings us back to Jesus' teaching in John 10, and I want to cast a pretty broad eye over this idea, because I think it applies in more than just one way to the life of the church. Jesus is the shepherd, and that is the one and only reason why we're still here. We always have his voice to come back to, even if we get tricked now and again by the thieves and bandits. The early church, with all that energy and some less than stellar organization, was the victim of lots of what Paul called wind and waves. The little church was tossed about by all sorts of nonsense, and for a while the only thing they had to correct them was the ministry of the Apostles, the eyewitnesses and Paul. Jesus using the metaphor of sheep was not at all inaccurate. They really needed a lot of guidance and correction.

Who I am I kidding? We still need a lot of that, and we don't have the excuse of youth anymore. Richard Rohr, I think pretty wisely, surmises that, in the church, 100 years is like one year in the life of a human being. Things change slowly, and growth across generations is not always linear, there are steps up and steps back, but we are, inevitably aging and growing. By that scheme, The Council of Nicea and Constantine's conversion happened when the church was learning to speak at about 3-4 years old. The Crusades and the Inquisition were our Middle School Bully phase. The Reformation was the result of our teenage rebellion, and now we are settling down into young adulthood, maybe we've graduated from college, or maybe not. At any rate, I'm reasonably sure we're not exactly mature in the faith the way Paul was always hoping we would be. And I don't think there's anywhere more central to our immaturity than what we think about the word Salvation.

I think there is a pretty good chance that perhaps we have equated salvation with repentance. In a lot of testimonies I have heard, the story is basically some variation of "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." And there is really nothing wrong with that, don't misunderstand me, being saved absolutely has a lot to do with recognizing your state of lost-ness and blindness and accepting God's grace. The thing about growing through stages in a healthy way is not looking back on your last stage and despising the things

that you held dear. You may recognize that you weren't quite as "righteous" as you thought (the story of my twenties for sure), but the trick is to not throw out the valuable things you've learned. Honor your story and your journey, even the suffering and the crosses, maybe especially them, and walk forward. To understand Salvation the way a lot of Christians have over the centuries is just too small. The thing is, there were people who grew up as individuals, Augustine, Aquinas, Francis, maybe even John Calvin, Karl Barth, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton and a good number of others who showed us what listening to the voice of the shepherd really looked like, and it wasn't just pearly gates and keeping your butt out of Hell. In other words, the Shepherd works in ways that unfold over time, and his voice, while it may be spoken with different lips, remains his voice for those who know it.

Salvation is BOTH a one-time event, and an on-going process. The one-time event part of it, is that moment of recognition of your sin and seeing the offer of God's grace. The on-going process part is learning to recognize the voice of your shepherd, and then following where he leads. The evangelical movements that have shaped the church in this country so powerfully, did a pretty good job of the one-time saving. The struggle has been getting us to recognize the voice of our shepherd, not getting taken in by thieves and robbers, and going out with Jesus to find the pastures and still waters that lead to life abundantly. The challenge has been walking through the valley of the shadow of death and fearing no evil, sitting in the midst of our enemies and having our cup run over to the benefit of all those around us.

God saves you by grace. After that, you have the job of spending the rest of your days being saved. The way to live into being saved is to live the way Jesus did, know his voice, listen to him, go where he says, do what he does. There is this remarkable promise here about following Jesus; that we will "have life and have it abundantly." I think we actually have trouble believing that, so we just either tend to figure it means something that gets pushed into the afterlife or we just reduce it down to simple material blessings. We're selling ourselves short in both cases. We're actually missing Jesus' point rather badly in both cases.

If your faith and your life and your journey with Christ is simply about making sure you get your ticket to heaven punched, you will probably never amount to much more than a Pharisee. It's just delayed gratification. Giving up on stuff that you obviously want to do now so that God will be pleased and let you in to the big party after you die. This is actually a pretty worldly idea dressed up in spiritual clothes. It's basically a diet, where you give up on the "sinful" things you really want, for "healthier things" or fewer calories, in this case though, your connection with God comes and goes with the ebb and flow of discipline and willpower. Your shepherd's voice sounds like a nagging conscience that is always telling you to be good and don't color outside the lines. You may get some positive results, but chances are you will eventually become either arrogant or bitter or maybe both and you will always be at the risk of blowing a gasket, when you just can't put on the act anymore.

But what if we offer a more immediate reward for faith? What if we make our faith in God into the ultimate tool of self-actualization? What if we learn that God, our Creator, is just itching to give us all sorts of good things if we just walk the right line and jump through the right hoops God will give us what we want if we simply believe. Our faith will not only make us well, it will make us rich!

These are the voices of the thieves and the bandits. Christ is calling you to live in a rather different way. A way that neither neglects the goodness of life and creation, nor puts all of its hope in material things. Salvation means seeing things as they are and learning to love no matter what.