

“Saved” Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21; Psalm 107:12-3, 17-22; 3-26-06

One of my dearest friends, now deceased, went to seminary in the 1950's after receiving his law degree. He was a Methodist before he saw the light of Congregationalism, so he went to Garrett Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. To get there he would take the “L” through Chicago. Often on his commute through the center of the city an earnest student from Moody Bible College would sidle up to him and ask, “Are you saved?” My friend after a long time of putting up with this, came up with an answer in the form of two questions. I imagine his legal training had helped him work this through with a great deal of logic. So, when the same question would be asked of him ad nauseum, he would respond, “Saved from what?” and “Saved to what?” This usually stopped the questioner in mid inquiry and guaranteed him safe passage for at least the remainder of one trip.

I would imagine the Bible College student doing the questioning would have an easier time answering the “from what” part of the question than the “to what” portion. My dear friend believed that “being saved” was never a onetime thing, but a process of moving forward into a better understanding of God through the teachings of Christ.

Two of our readings for this morning speak of ways of being saved. One is the rather strange story in the book of Numbers of the bronze snake lifted up on a staff that saved those from death who gazed upon said snake after being bitten by venomous serpents. This was a dramatic way of illustrating the strength of God's power to people who wavered in their faith and turned away from it often. It was a way of telling them that if they would believe they would live.

A somewhat parallel reading appears in our New Testament in which those who fix their eyes on Jesus, the one raised up on the cross, are told they will live eternally. In these two readings, as well as in the third, the message of being saved by God's grace is revealed. This is an important part of our faith story.

But we always need to remember that the grace so freely given to us is the same kind of grace we are to grant to all others who share this common life with us. Sometimes we forget that we are to extend the kindness and non-judgmental spirit of Christ to others. We forget that the one who was raised up was raised up and held up before us for a reason--that we might keep our eyes on the life and teachings that should always dwell within our hearts and minds and souls and not turn away. The fact that we sometimes try to withhold this wonderful quality of grace is shown to us in story after story of rejection of our fellow humans even by those thought to be the best among us.

This fact was brought home to me once again as I sat outside the airport in Milwaukee waiting for my assistant to pick me up the other day. I was waiting because I always fudge a little on my arrival times so that no one has to sit and wait for me. And, I hate to feel rushed when I move through the airport. So there I was, early, as usual, sitting on a stone bench near a designated smoking area watching the cars go round and around.

During the half hour I was there, people would come along, light up a cigarette or bum one from someone else, spend a few minutes in the cold, formerly clear air, smoking and then disappear. All but one. A young woman, who followed the ritual of lighting up and then sat down beside me. People often sit beside me because, in my dotage, I appear rather harmless and benign. So, she sat and coughed and smoked and said, “I probably don't need this.” I agreed. She went on to tell me she had come in from Atlanta and this was the only airport she flew into where her ears blocked up. I mentioned that I thought that happened because the approach over Lake Michigan was a long and slow descent. In the course of the conversation she asked who it is I worked for and while I know the right answer is “God,” I told her about you and about the National Association. At this point she looked at me and said, “Let me tell you about my traumatic experience with the church.” I thought “Oh, goodie.” So, she did. Her story was a sad one, but in it were seeds of hope.

As a young woman, she told me, she had grown up in a very strict Protestant denomination. Some of its doctrines bothered her as she grew up, especially the one that barred women from any leadership role in the church, even service on a committee. Now, some of us might argue that this might be a good thing—but I know most here would not.

In spite of this, she was very faithful to that church following all the rules and regulations. She attended every service offered and eventually married in the church. Her marriage turned out to be very abusive but she struggled to remain in it for ten years recalling her vows to stick it out “for better or worse.” She finally decided, for survival’s sake, to get a divorce. It was a terribly difficult decision for her that would only be compounded by her pastor.

Following worship one Sunday, as he was greeting people after church, he told her he could no longer offer her the sacrament of communion because she was “clearly an unrepentant sinner” who had no right to take part in the Lord’s supper. She left shattered and traumatized, never to return.

She looked at me for my reaction. As many of you know what I think is often written all over my face. I told her that I did not believe the message of Christ had any room in it that allowed us to judge and deliberately try to hurt others. There was room at the table for everyone, especially those who had been injured by life. We exist as a body of Christ to hold and comfort those who have been broken. I also told her to try us again and suggested a few denominations that are more open than her former one. As we parted she told me that she thought she might be ready to go back. “Just try it,” I answered “and you will know if it is right.”

I retold this story as a devotion for the NA staff the next day. Later a young woman came into my tiny, secluded office and told me how the story had touched her. I reminded her that many of our stories intersect—this helps unite us in our humanity and helps us understand and appreciate where others come from on their soul’s journey.

She agreed and then told me her story. Before she was married she had a child and wanted her baby baptized. She asked a good friend to be the godfather and he told her he doubted she would find anyone to perform this sacrament for the child of an “unrepentant sinner.” So she approached the pastor of her church with a bit of apprehension. When she asked if her baby could be baptized, his response, was, “Of course, why not?” Her response to him was, “Your words have saved me.” His words, his lack of judgment, his understanding, his love and compassion for another child of God in whom he saw his Creator reflected, saved her.

How many times have we had the opportunity to extend our hands, hearts, and words to another in a loving and healing way but instead opted to look at another with contempt and judgment? How many times have we refused to extend the grace of God to another—that grace with which we have been so blessed?

People need us just as they needed to look at the staff held high by Moses and just as they need to look to Christ. We are God’s earthly representatives, those who must learn to walk in the light so that our goodness is revealed. We all have it in us to be the sustaining Christ-light for others. We have been saved to do this. Do not turn away. Do not turn away. Amen