

Psalm 72:1-2, 11-20
Philippians 2:12-16

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Baccalaureate Sunday

How Jesus 'Saves'

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; or it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. *Philippians 2:21-13*

When our daughter Katherine graduated from Washington College two years ago, Jane and I looked around for a singles scull rowing shell (a racing boat) as a graduation present. She had rowed for eight years through Conestoga High School and college, and we wanted to contribute to what rowers often call a "lifelong" sport. But when Katherine dropped the hint that she would like to move out to Seattle for a year after graduation, the prospect of shipping an expensive and fragile 27 foot racing shell 3,000 miles across country safely, was pretty intimidating. So we held off, and out of the goodness of our hearts gave her a newly minted, crisp \$5 bill instead. (Just kidding!)

It was providential that we did change plans. Some months later I asked Katherine if, around those splendid maritime Seattle waters, she had rowed much. She had taken single sculls out a few times, she offered. "But Dad, it's just not the same. I really miss the companionship of rowing as a team and working together in the boat."

I was not really surprised. Katherine had spoken often of rowing as "the ultimate team sport." Which is not to denigrate any other sport. As you can imagine, to take one single oar rower out of a four or an eight person boat would be disastrous.

What has that to do with salvation, you might ask? Just this: when Paul writes to the church in Philippi (which he founded) telling them to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," the *your* in Greek is clearly plural. The church is a body, commonly and very intentionally called "the body of Christ." The church at its best is a team sport.

Salvation is about fixing broken relationships.

Much of American Christianity has focused on the *individual*, and it has become fixated on the salvation of the soul *after* death. Our culture, after all, was born into a sense of rugged individualism, with emphasis on the freedom of the individual and the right to self-determination, justice for and the rights of the individual, the individual entrepreneurial spirit

and exploration in the westward expansion, and Yankee individualism—that proud trait of New Englanders. Community becomes an enclave of individuals.

But these are astonishingly alien concepts to the Bible, which has no sense of the individual apart from community. The foundational events and leaders of the Old Testament—Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets, are singly focused on creating a national people dedicated to God. The name “Israel” itself is a reference not to a place but to a people. The “you” of the ten commandments addresses not individuals but the corporate “you” of the community, who are to recite the ten commandments together each time they gather for worship, easily memorizable on ten fingers (the “Cliff Notes” of the Old Testament). The first four commandments address the nation’s relationship to God; the last five speak not to the individual but to what is not acceptable among society—murder, adultery, theft, perjury, craving. Temple sacrifices were offered *for the people*, and where offered by individuals, they were for the family so that the each could continue to live with integrity in the community. The greatest punishment that could be inflicted on an individual was to be banished from society, and to be so marked, like Cain after murdering his brother Abel. Such banishment is virtually untenable in our society.

Christians often talk of a “personal Savior.” But the expression is not found anywhere in the Bible. In fact, Jesus would have been appalled by the notion that anyone could be in a meaningful relationship with God apart from the community of faith.

Insofar as salvation is about mending broken relationships, it operates in three tenses. (1) Fixing what is broken in the **past**: forgiving, being forgiven (the Lord’s Prayer that we pray each Sunday is very specific about the rationale for that order), reconciling thereby oneself to God and neighbor, from whom our mutual conduct has exiled us. (2) Living rightly and consciously toward God and neighbor in the **present**: loving toward neighbor, which means simply being a conduit for God’s love toward us, being peacemakers and peace givers, caring for those in need, acting justly, giving hope. (3) Finally, looking toward the **future** and the consummation of our full reunion with redeemed humanity, and God, unto whom the conduct of all life is justly answerable.

Salvation, then, is not principally an end state, but a process of building and rebuilding relationships with God, neighbor, and ourselves—the latter from whom we are sometimes most estranged—in our discovery of our best selves. These three are indistinguishable if we are to say that we are Christian (or Jewish or Muslim, who have so much to teach us about the nature of community).

In the same way, to say that I am a soccer player, or a nurse, a teacher, musician or attorney, a corporate officer or a student—is incomprehensible apart from community. Even the so-called solitary monk in his cell is linked to a community for his food, worship and nursing care. There is no life apart from community. How else are we given birth?

It is a common deception that it is quite legitimate to be a Christian apart from the fellowship of the church. Yet consider a glowing coal taken from the body of the fire. When laid aside on its own it quickly grows cold and lifeless, but in the fire it both gives heat to the body of the fire and receives what it needs, and its life and value increase phenomenally.

Frederick Buechner puts it with characteristic directness: “To love God *is* to be saved.” “It is,” he says, “a *process* not an event.” This is how Jesus saves, over the life journey.