

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 26, 2020

1 KINGS 3:5-12 | PSALM 119:129-136 | ROMANS 8:26-39 | MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

For the past few weeks, we've been talking about Jesus's parables. Lots of stuff about seeds in different types of soil. Different ways of planting and harvesting. Different ways seeds turn into plants. And, to be honest, I looked at this weekend's readings, saw "mustard seed" and thought to myself, *I can't do it*. So we're going to pivot this week and look at today's reading from Romans. This is good timing because this selection is one of the most beautiful and profound in the New Testament.

The central question in the book of Romans is *How do people find salvation?* Everything in Romans about faith and works, Jews and Gentiles, sin and justification is really about the question of how it is that people find salvation. Before we get into what Paul says about salvation, let's stop and think through how we talk about salvation. And when I say "salvation," I mean the fulfillment of life in relationship with God and others.¹

Sometimes we like to imagine that we can achieve salvation for ourselves. That if you pray enough a certain way, if you perform the right rituals, if you believe the right list of things, you can make yourself acceptable to God. Occasionally, people will get frustrated with me that there aren't more rules and processes for them to go through in the congregation. We celebrate open communion, which means that everyone who comes to the table receives the sacrament. Most people understand the theological rationale and understand why. But occasionally people get very worked up because it feels like you should have to do something. You should have to take a class or pass a test or meet some kind of standard or do *something*. We like to think that we can find salvation with God on our own or, at the very least, speed up the process.

And we believe that we can achieve salvation in the eyes of others on our own, too. Our communities are full of people who've bought into a kind of myth that they can finally be happy and find fulfillment in life when they attain the right house, the right partner, the right family, the right zip code, the right career. And they strive and strive all their lives thinking that this next thing is going to make me feel truly whole, and it never does. Because as soon as you get what you always wanted, there's something else that looks even better.²

But the opposite of this is also true. We sometimes believe that we can find salvation on our own terms, but sometimes we think we're irredeemable. That we often think that we've strayed so far from the path that there's no way to get back on it. Occasionally people will remark to me that they'd like to get involved with a community of faith, but they're worried that they're not the right kind of person or that they haven't behaved the right way or they don't check the right boxes (whatever that means).

And our communities may be chocked full of people who think they can consume their way to wholeness, but they're also full of people who find it difficult to accept love. Who believe that if people really knew them, they wouldn't want to be around them. We often make a big deal of how polarized and anxious we are, but we vastly underestimate the amount of shame that runs through our communities.

Those are two very different worldviews. One is a kind of consumer-oriented hubris that believes we can achieve our own salvation via religious ritual or consumer goods, the other is a sense of inadequacy

¹ Definition borrowed from Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 319. There are countless other definitions you could use, but this covers most of the basics.

² Obviously, I'm not talking about people who live in poverty or are in abusive relationships or have health problems or anything like that. I'm thinking about people who could live very stable lives but take on massive amounts of debt to attain a wannabe Gordon Gekko lifestyle that fills them with a sense of resentment and suspicion toward the people around them. That insecurity and feeling of inadequacy is part of the reason why people who have been very fortunate in life feel as if they've been wronged.

from the belief that we're irredeemable and about to get found out. But they actually have two important things in common. The first is that we are somehow separated from salvation somehow. We feel a gap between where we are right now and where God would intend for us to be. The second is that getting to salvation is all about us. They're all about our actions, our decisions, our choices. Whether you can find salvation in the chapel, in the market, in the workplace, in the world, well, it's up to you.

In today's reading from Romans, St. Paul takes this idea and flips it on its head. How do people find salvation? Well, if you believe St. Paul, they don't find it at all. It finds them. If you look through this reading, pay attention to who the subject is. For those whom God predestined, he writes, God also called. Those whom God called, God also justified. And those whom God justified, God also glorified.

Notice who is actually doing something here. Is it you? No, it's God. The foundation of everything St. Paul is talking about here is about God's action. Salvation is not something you can achieve by your own efforts, and it's not something you can lose by making the wrong choices. Salvation is something that's given to us again and again and again and again. We often talk about salvation as a kind of category or a kind of item. But Paul imagines it as a kind of energy that animates our entire lives.

This is a big idea and there are about twenty different takeaways you could get here. But let me just give you one. Because salvation belongs to God alone, it is out of our control. It's not something we can claim for ourselves. And it's not something we can lose. It's something that's given to us. Which means that everyone we encounter is in relationship with God before they are in relationship with us. We don't encounter others as people who need to be fixed, as people who are broken, as people who are beyond the pale. We encounter other people, and ourselves, as people who are grounded in relationship with God no matter their circumstances.

That might change how we think of the end of this passage. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's a beautiful passage. And I'm hesitant to try to put it in our own words. But its poetry might make its point a little less clear. So try it this way. "Neither death, nor life, nor depression, nor hunger, nor addiction, nor infertility, nor ambivalence, nor wealth, nor fear, nor tumult, nor indifference, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." It doesn't flow as nicely, but I think you get the point.

Salvation is not a goal we strive for, a reward for good behavior, or a blessing for living the right way. It's the foundation, the source, and the grounding of our lives. Which means that we can stop striving, stop grasping, stop clutching. And instead we can start truly living.

For I am convinced that nothing in all of creation, not even our attempts to achieve salvation or belief that we're irredeemable, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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