

"What It Means To Be Saved"
Studies in Romans
Lesson Five: "Salvation and the Spirit"
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
July 24, 2001
Text: Romans 8:26-39
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In this series of sermons from the New Testament book of Romans, we have been talking about salvation, what it means for us to be saved and come into a right relationship with God. As we have discussed previously, we are saved by God's grace through our faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ by virtue of his sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

So as it stands in this sermon series, we have spent a good deal of time already talking about God the Father and God the Son, but we haven't really mentioned the role of God the Holy Spirit, thus our discussion of salvation is less trinitarian than it needs to be. Therefore our focus today will be on filling in that gap, so to speak, by dwelling on the Spirit's role in our salvation.

The most important thing that needs to be understood upfront is that *salvation is a process*. John Wesley believed so strongly in this understanding of salvation that he insisted that it begins with what he called *prevenient grace*, the work the Holy Spirit does in our lives

through various means to bring us to the point of conversion. Once we reach the age of accountability and profess faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord, we become justified by God's grace. We are right-wisdomed with God at that point. The reason for that is because through justifying grace, God imparts to us righteousness, since to profess faith in Christ is to confess that we are indeed sinners and thus trust in Jesus' death on the cross to atone for our sins so that we may receive forgiveness from God.

For many conservative evangelical Christians, to be saved means only to be justified, so in essence, that is all there is to salvation. It is not so for us United Methodists as mainline Christians, because *we stress the importance of sanctification even more than justification.* Once we have been justified by grace through faith, the process of sanctification begins. It is at that point that we receive the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us to work in cooperation with our own spirits to help us be obedient to God so that we will become more and more like Christ. The endpoint of this process is what Paul referred to as glorification and Wesley referred to as Christian perfection, becoming perfectly loving in the same way Jesus loved.

This understanding of salvation as a process is implied over and over again in Paul's writings. In our passage today from Romans, the apostle talks about the ongoing assistance we receive from the Spirit—

helping us to pray appropriately, interceding for us before God, and serving as a resource for our being able to know the mind of God and his will for our lives. Obviously this assistance we receive from the Holy Spirit is not a one-time occurrence; it continues all through our lives. What kind of God would say to us, "I've justified you, so I'm done with you. Have a nice life."

I was fortunate in growing up in the particular Baptist church I did in Gainesville to have had a pastor who was a Wesleyan in terms of theology, though I didn't understand that to be the case at the time. I only did after attending two seminaries. Dr. Roark said more than once from the pulpit that it is not entirely appropriate to say that we *have been saved* as if it were a fixed and static state of being. It is better, in agreement with Paul, to say that we *are being saved*. Salvation is an ongoing process empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The *power* of the Holy Spirit is often spoken of in the Church and rightfully so. Sometimes, though, I think we may fail to recognize and appreciate all of the aspects the Spirit's power. We understand that the Spirit empowers us with certain spiritual gifts, so that we are equipped to serve God in the unique way we are called to by God. But I think there are two somewhat subtle yet vital aspect of the Spirit's power that we need to be aware of, and they are the two aspects of that power Paul suggests in this passage from Romans.

The first is **the power of God's presence**. It seems to me that it is this aspect of the Spirit's empowerment Paul describes in verses 31-39. He is presenting what he feels is the Spirit's power to keep us connected to God. Through the Spirit we have the opportunity to stay "plugged in" to the Lord. There is a never-failing connection the Spirit maintains between us and our Father in heaven. And when there is a connection, a bond, a tie, a weld of sorts like this, guess what is simply not possible. *Separation*. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, moving us along our faith journey toward Christlikeness, we cannot become separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, no matter what. *No matter what*.

For a child and for his or her parents, separation can be an extremely scary thing. I recall having a panic attack when I was a child and got separated from my dad in a grocery store that seemed enormous at the time. I also recall having the same kind of panic attack when I got separated from my son, Matthew, in the Orlando airport when he was a child. Fortunately, neither separation lasted more than a couple of minutes, plenty of time for me, however, to become horribly frightened. The fear of separation certainly can lead to anxiety, dread, depression, and despair.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit can help us to understand that what Paul says in verses 38-39 is true: nothing, absolutely nothing can

separate us from the love of God. Nothing in death can separate us; nothing in life can separate us; angels can't separate us; political rulers of any kind cannot separate us; things that are true now or that will be true in the future can't separate us; the powerful individuals and institutions of our world can't separate us from the love of God. We can search high and low for anything that might come between us and God, and we simply won't be able to find it. That is just how strong our connection is with God through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

I readily tell you that this portion of Romans 8 is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. I make reference to it at nearly every funeral or memorial service I officiate, because it speaks not only about the deceased person, who cannot be separated from the love of God, but also about those who grieve the loss of that person, who also are assured of the impossibility of being separated from God's love in Christ.

For me, the essence of the message from these verses is very simple: *we never walk alone*. God, through the Spirit, is always with us. And because I believe that this affirmation is the obvious implication of Paul's words here, it reminds me of the moving inspirational song from the beloved musical, *Carousel*, with that very same message.

When you walk through the storm

Hold your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm
There's a golden sky and the sweet silver song of the lark

Walk on, through the wind
Walk on, through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone; you'll never walk alone

There can be, if we will allow it to be true for us, a tremendous amount of power for living when we appropriate the knowledge of the presence of God. It can make a huge difference in how we deal with things, both good things and bad things. But there is an equally important aspect of the Spirit's power that I think this passage of scripture we have for this morning allows us to understand. From the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we not only can be assured of the power of God's presence, we can be assured of **the power of God's perspective.**

Perspective is critically important. My friend, David Matthews, suggests that perspective is what sets Christians apart from other religious traditions. His view is that the difference in being a Christian is the difference of perspective. The Church has a unique way of looking at God, ourselves, and the world. This difference is not to be

dismissed or taken lightly; it is a powerful thing in the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ.

What is that perspective? It is the perspective stated in the first portion of Romans 8:28, the translation of which is better, in my opinion, in the Today's English Version of the Bible: "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, . . ." God is present in all things and labors in all things for redemptive possibilities. Bad things happen in our world. God is not the cause of them, and God doesn't keep us from experiencing them, since God honors and respects our free will. God seeks to cause there to be good things to happen even out of the worst things that happen in our lives.

But God does not do that alone, that is, without our cooperation. That is why this translation states that God works for good *with* (not for) those who love him. We have to work with God, and what that means is that we need to have trust in God and obey him in order for his redemptive possibilities to occur. God won't do it all by himself; we have to participate in the process. *We have to yield and submit ourselves to his will.* And what is it that helps us to participate in that process? The Holy Spirit.

This perspective is a powerful thing indeed. This perspective—that God is working for redemptive possibilities in all things—allows us to believe, as Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, that as Christians:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed, . . ." This perspective is not merely optimism, seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty. It is genuine faith, *seeing the glass as full, no matter how much water is in it*. It is full because of the Holy Spirit's power to help us to see things from God's perspective rather than our own.

In many quarters of the Church, salvation is seen as instantaneous, something that happens once and with little or no continuation or development. It also is seen as being entirely about faith in God through Christ, with little or no dependence on the Holy Spirit. As a Wesleyan, I disagree with both viewpoints. Salvation is a process, what we call sanctification, which relies on our cooperation with the Holy Spirit to work to make us more like Christ. That means that *the more we are like Christ, the more we are saved*. Think about it: If more people in the Church today understood this to be true, the less hypocrisy there would be and the more people coming into the Church there would be.

To be completely like him in every possible way should be the goal of every Christian. We should spend every waking moment of our lives seeking after that goal. And the good news is that we don't have to strive to accomplish it all by ourselves. We have the Holy Spirit within

us who leads us, guides us, instructs us, encourages us, and empowers us to reach that goal. By assuring us of the presence of God and opening our minds and hearts to the perspective of God, the Holy Spirit is our indwelling coach, so to speak—pushing and prodding us, what we call motivation—to become more like Jesus and thus to become fully and completely saved. That is the relationship between salvation and the Spirit.