

WHAT DOES IT MEAN “TO BE SAVED,” AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?¹

Luke 15: 3-10

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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One of our young adults has asked a question that is the topic for today’s sermon: What does it mean “to be saved,” and why is it important? Let’s think about it together.

I

The first thing to say about the term is that Jesus did indeed tell a number of stories about being saved and lost. We read two of them this morning: one about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but he discovered that one was lost, so he left the ninety-nine and trudged off into the wilderness until he found it. He went after that one lost sheep, not because it was the fattest or the healthiest or the favorite, but simply because it was lost. He laid it across his shoulders and came home, invited his friends and neighbors over for a party, and said, *Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.*

The other parable is about a woman who has lost one of her ten precious silver coins. Was it one-tenth of her retirement savings? Was it one of the ten silver coins she had worn in her hairpiece at her wedding? Was it a

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family heirloom? She turns the house upside down looking for the one lost coin. She looks under the bed and behind everything, and when she finds it, she calls in her neighbors for a party. And she uses the same language as the shepherd: *Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I have lost.*

Then, of course, the next parable (the one we did not read today) is about a lost son. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son. And at the end of the story, when the younger son returns to his home, the father throws a party and says to his sulking older son, *...we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.*²

So there is no doubt that Jesus used the language of being saved and lost. But the question I raise this morning is this: when Jesus uses this language, is he talking primarily about the afterlife (going to heaven) or is he talking about this life?

Clearly, Jesus himself believed in heaven, but have you noticed that he didn't talk about it much? When he did talk about it, usually the subject is brought up by someone else, and Jesus seems less interested in giving information about heaven than he is in subverting the over-confident ideas

² All three of the parables are found in Luke 15.

other people have about heaven and who will be there.³ He certainly never tried to scare people or manipulate people into faith in order to go to heaven. In any case, a clear-eyed reading of the gospels makes it obvious that the primary message of Jesus was not about how to get to heaven; it was about a way of transforming life in this world. He called it the Kingdom of God, which is a way of envisioning what the world would be like if God were king instead of the Roman emperor or whatever political arrangements exist in any century.

When Jesus talked about being saved, he was almost always talking about salvation in the PRESENT tense. Salvation, while not denying a future life, is most often about this world. Clearly, when Jesus talked about being saved, he was talking about a transformation of THIS world.

It helps to think of the root meaning of the word “salvation.” It comes from a Latin word that means “wholeness” or “healing.” It is the same root word that we use for “salve,” the ointment we put on a cut to help it heal. In its broadest sense, salvation means becoming whole, experiencing healing. It implies the healing of the wounds we all experience in life.

To be saved means that we experience the healing power and presence of God at the place where we need it the most. If your greatest need is to be

³ For example, see Mark 12: 18-27; Matthew 25: 31-46; and Luke 13: 28-30.

forgiven for something you cannot change about your past, that is where salvation takes place for you. If it is to find direction for a life that seems aimless, Jesus becomes the way for you. If it is to discover a deep sense of peace when you are living in a time of anxiety and even chaos all around you, then that is where salvation meets you. To be saved, in other words, is the power of the divine connecting with your deepest need. To be saved is to be reconnected with the One in whom we live and move and have our being, the One who has always been here even though we have been estranged. In the imagery of the prodigal son story, salvation is about coming home.

II

There is one more aspect of being “saved” that must be mentioned, if only in passing. When many people hear the language of being saved, they think of it only in personal terms. To “be saved” is something an individual experiences. But in biblical thought, salvation is also a community experience. Salvation is about life in community. It is about creating a community where there is peace and justice. It is about creating a community characterized by the Hebrew word *shalom*, a word which is far more than just the absence of war. It means the wholeness and healing of people living together in mutual respect and care.

So when you contribute to community organizations that help the needy, give support to youth, decrease the number of homeless, help find jobs for people, and strengthen helping organizations of all kinds, you are contributing to the salvation of a community. The Apostle Paul referred to it as creating new communities “in Christ,” whose life together provided an alternative to the power-hungry vision of the Empire. These communities were characterized both by spirit and bread, the sharing of the necessities of life and the deepening of the awareness of God. It was both, and that constituted salvation for a community. When we hear proposals for the slashing of budgets that help the poor in a community, we must ask ourselves what those cuts will mean to the social salvation of our life together.

The Christian vision, in other words, is not so much about saving individuals to go to heaven as much as it is about saving people to be the best that they can be in this life as well as saving communities to live in peace and justice. Heaven may very well be waiting for us, but heaven is not the main reason to be saved.

III

Writer Anne Lamott tells the story of a childhood friend who, when she was seven years old, got lost and couldn't find her way home. She was in a city, and she ran up and down the streets trying to find landmarks. If you have

ever been lost like that, you can appreciate the panic that anyone can feel in such a situation. But this seven-year-old child was fortunate that a policeman saw her and drove her around looking for something she recognized. After a long search, she said to the policeman, “You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”⁴

Sometimes we can get so lost in our life that we can't find our way home, at least not on our own. This is the place where you are no longer lost, but found by the One who loves you and celebrated by a community of caring. This is the place where we are “saved” to be the best we can be.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 55.