

30 June 2019

“Journey of Faith”
Hebrews 5:7-14

Our scripture today is from the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the author challenges his readers to continue growing in their faith. We read chapter 5, verses 7-14.

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

¹¹ About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

So here's a fairly important question for Christians: How do you *become* one? What's the process? Or, in church jargon, how do you get *saved*? Well, there have been some different answers that. In the Middle Ages, in Christian Europe, you became a Christian by being born into a Christian society and getting baptized as an infant. That was the key thing. Only the baptized got to go to heaven. Even newborn babies didn't get to go, if they died before being baptized. (The Roman Catholic Church has changed that teaching.) But that was it. If you got your sprinkling of water, you were a Christian. And there are still some who seem to believe this.

But that's a little problematic, isn't it? The New Testament talks about salvation as becoming a new creature, of being transformed into the image and likeness of Christ, and it seems fairly obvious that baptism as an infant doesn't necessarily produce those results. Moreover, this makes salvation sort of random. That is, people are saved by the accident of their birth – having been born in a culture and to a family that will get you the right treatment. Most of all, what does that say about God? A God who makes a ritual performed on you by others the deciding factor in whether you're accepted bears no resemblance to the God Jesus talks about. Jesus describes a God of love, passionately seeking relationship with people; a God who is ticking off baptisms for admission is a celestial bureaucrat.

So, starting in the Protestant Reformation, we got a different answer to the salvation question: salvation is a gracious gift of God to those who receive that gift with faith. That puts more emphasis on our own response to God's grace, and as that developed we got what you could call the Evangelical Plan of Salvation. That is, the key is no longer a sacrament done by the church, but it's a personal thing. It's making a personal decision to follow Christ; it's “inviting Christ into your heart”; it's “asking Christ to be your personal Lord and Savior.” Now this is personal, but apparently it's best if it happens publicly and dramatically – like at a revival

meeting or weeping on your knees as someone shares with you the “plan of salvation” and leads you in “the Sinner’s Prayer.”

But this description of salvation has its own problems. For instance, once again, it’s hard to argue that giving your heart to Jesus at a youth rally will make you a “new creature” and transform you. America is full of people who went forward at a revival meeting one time who barely remember it. Moreover, this pattern doesn’t always hold true. Some of us – and this includes me – never did have a dramatic, life-changing, one-time salvation experience, but I am still a follower of Christ. And finally, once again you have to wonder what kind of God is it who makes one moment of decision in a person’s entire life the single deciding factor in determining that person’s eternity.

This is where the teaching of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, is a breath of fresh air. Wesley describes salvation not as a single event or decision but as a relationship that extends over a person’s whole life. Since every life is unique, each person’s salvation journey will be different, but in general terms that salvation will go through three stages, each one blessed by the grace of God. So let us begin with the first stage of the journey and the grace that fills it. Wesley called that grace “Prevenient Grace,” which only means “grace that comes before anything else.” This is the grace that God grants in love and joy from the moment of our birth, the grace that surrounds us and guides us as we learn how to love the beautiful, how to discern good and evil, how to love others. In the words of the hymn, this is the love which from our birth over and around us lies.

This grace is what we Methodists celebrate with baptism. No, we don’t see baptism as a get out of hell free card; it is an anointing of God’s grace that will start us off on the journey toward faith. And so now, let me introduce you to Chris and Mindy and Camille. Some of you may have already met this family: they started visiting us some six months ago. But recently they have been joining us by our Facebook livestream. You see, there are challenges in getting Camille out to church. Camille was born prematurely, with serious GI issues. She still takes most of her nutrition through a feeding tube and still is susceptible to infection in ways that most children are not. Chris and Mindy have expressed an interest in joining our church, and we will be in conversation about the commitments and responsibilities that involves, but there are no prerequisites for God’s grace, and so today we celebrate that grace in Camille’s baptism. I invite you to turn to the baptism folder that you received with your bulletin.

Baptism of Camille Lorraine Bardsley

So the first stage of our journey of faith is undertaken almost unconsciously, surrounded by a loving God who prompts us toward faith through the miracle of creation, the growth of conscience, and through the love and example of those around us.

But that’s just the beginning. There is a goal toward which all that growth and guidance is leading: it is the opportunity to choose Christ for ourselves. In that early stage, you could say that what rudimentary faith we have is still an inherited faith: it’s the tacit acceptance of the faith that we have encountered in others. But there comes a time for us to begin our *own* journey of faith. This is not an easy thing to do, nor should it be. Christ did not call us to sign on a dotted line;

Christ called us to take up a cross and follow him. Indeed, if it were not for the power of God given to us through the Spirit, we wouldn't be able to make this choice. But God does grant us that grace, a special outpouring of grace to help us step over that threshold for ourselves. Wesley called this grace, "Justifying Grace."

It is this grace that we celebrate when an adult makes a commitment to Christ and is baptized, and it is this grace that we celebrate in confirmation. Today, we celebrate that grace with three young people who have been through our confirmation process and have chosen to make their faith public today.

Confirmation of Peter Albert, Alaina Breed, Logan Breed

John Wesley talked about one more stage in the journey of faith. You see, having gotten to the point of accepting Christ for yourself, you might think you're done. Indeed, that's one of the unintended messages of the Evangelical view of salvation, that it's all about making that one-time decision. It can feel as if then you're finished. But that's just the start. At that point, Wesley says, you're just starting a new stage. This stage, which Wesley called "sanctifying grace" is the path of growing in service, increasing in love for God and neighbor, marching toward perfection. This is where the author of Hebrews was pointing in the passage we read earlier. "Hey," he says, "what's happened to you? By this time you should be eating solid food and feeding others, but you still need milk. Even Jesus had to grow and learn obedience; you think you're exempt? Don't sit around waiting for others to come along and feed you – grow up!" So that's our challenge today. We've celebrated the grace of God that has enfolded Camille. We've celebrated the decision made by Peter, Logan, and Alaina to enter that faith personally. And now, look around you. Look especially for those whom you know have been faithful servants in this church for decades. That's what salvation looks like, not a single ritual or a single moment of decision, but a lifetime of moments and million decisions leading a soul toward Christ. Amen.