

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
“Saved: From Brimstone to Right Relationship”
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American Evangelicalism would tell us that we need to be saved, and many of the mid to late 20th-century revival meetings were focused on just that, “saving souls for Jesus.” This has always left me feeling a bit off. I think it’s because I lean towards the patient, long path of discipleship, rather than the numbers game of getting as many people saved (or baptized) as possible. Something that has always troubled me about the “saving souls for Jesus” approach is an unanswered question: saved from what?

Like many of the words that we’ve talked about, there are as many answers as there are people. What is it that we’re being saved from? Death? Hell? Brimstone, eternal separation from God, or as one recent TV show chose to call it, “the Bad Place.” Or is it something else? This is where we get confused, and also where we can misunderstand one another.

Salvation is one of the spokes in the wheel of our Christian faith. And I don’t believe that ignoring it or discarding it, is a way to wrestle with the sometimes messiness of the idea. So let’s together, look at this church word with baggage.

Salvation as a word is one of those words that’s thrown around quite a bit, with many assumed meanings. Sometimes folk will use the more colloquial term “saved” instead of salvation. At other times, you might hear the word ‘justified,’ which is something that the Apostle Paul is fond of. Salvation is one of those “Christian” words that we use and assume a meaning for it.

I’ll even criticize our Confession of Faith for a moment here. When describing salvation, they use the word to define the word. It writes: We believe that, through Jesus Christ, God offers salvation from sin and a new way of life. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community. We place our faith in God that, by the same power that raised Christ from the dead, we may be saved from sin to follow Christ and to know the fullness of salvation. Not exactly helpful insofar as telling us *what* salvation is.

Now, I’m not much of a language person; I’ve often remarked that my Greek and Hebrew classes in seminary were the happiest “C”s I ever earned. So I rely on many helps to get me here. Searching back into the languages, Salvation has its origins in Latin, not Greek or Hebrew, curiously enough. Now, I’m not a student of Latin, so forgive me for butchering any of the Latin here. Salvātiō is the root word, meaning to make safe, or to preserve. Other words that share salvātiō as a root include *salve*, *safe*, *salutary*, and even *salutation*. This tells me that Salvation, at least in Latin, has a much broader application. When Christians started using it more frequently, religious and theological layers were added to it, and it took on the meaning that I think most of us are familiar with, “deliverance from sin and its consequences.” As interesting as this is, doing a word study, it’s not helping me redeem the word; it’s not unpacking some of the baggage that I carry. It’s not answering my question, “saved from what?”

Next, I turned to my handy *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, I found that they define salvation as: “God’s activities in bringing creation into right relationship with God and one another through Jesus Christ. They, humankind, is saved from the consequences of their Sin,” and remember I talk about Sin as misdirected, dis-oriented love, “and given eternal life.”

Already, I’m finding this an attractive definition for Salvation; it, for me at least, starts to remove some of the American Evangelical baggage that has been heaped onto ‘Salvation.’ I like the

emphasis on the right relationship with God. It feels like this understanding has less of a presumed destination in mind. Though at the same time, it does mention consequences for disoriented, misdirected love; Sin. I still have questions.

I think to unpack some of this baggage, we need to move away from definitions and start to think about 'salvation' as a concept. How do we understand it? As I've studied, I've become convinced that at the core of salvation is movement; it's not stagnant. It's not a one-time event; there's more going on. I've begun to think that salvation is an active and ongoing thing; it's something that we experience in the present, but will not be fully disclosed until the future. The here and not yet.

If I follow this thread of movement, then my question of "saved from what?" changes. When I think of 'salvation' today, I think of three movements, summarized in three words: 'by', 'to', and 'from.' We are saved *by* Jesus' actions on the cross, we are saved *from* the powers of Sin and Death, and we are saved *to* love as Jesus and God love. If, however, the language of 'saved' also carries some baggage, there are some other words that we could use. Earlier, I mentioned that salvation can also mean deliverance.

This got me thinking about the Israelite experience of their liberation, their deliverance, their freedom, from slavery under Egyptian rule. And I wonder if there is a narrative and theological parallel here. We are told, after all, that history has a tendency to repeat itself. Can we also use similar language for salvation? Can we talk about being liberated by Jesus, freed by Jesus, can we talk about being liberated from the bondage to the powers of Sin and Death, can we be freed? And can we talk about being liberated to love as Jesus and God love? to be freed to do so? Maybe...

To say that we are saved, liberated, delivered or freed by Jesus' actions on the cross, I think, asks for a little clarity on our part.

Central to our understanding of salvation is Jesus' actions on the cross. The cross is unavoidable. The cross in all of its ugliness is a part of our story of freedom. That said, Jesus' death on the cross is not the complete act of salvation; it's one part.

A popular theory of salvation includes the notion that Jesus needed to die so that God could once again look upon humankind. All this, because of the actions of Adam and Eve in Eden. I disagree with this. I do not believe that God did require or demand Jesus' blood so that God could once again be in a right relationship with God's creation. If this were the case, then the Gospels should be much, much shorter. God would not have prevented the infant Jesus' death in the Gospel of Matthew, after Herod commanded all male children 2 years old or younger to be killed. No, Jesus' death was the result of sinful humans taking matters into their own hands. Humankind's jealousy, pride, envy, and hubris all led to the cross, and all that misdirected, disoriented love, all of humanity's Sin, led Jesus to the cross. Rather, Jesus' actions on the cross demonstrate Jesus and God's great love for their creation. That they were willing to die to be at one with humankind. And so it's through Jesus' actions on the cross, we are freed, we are liberated, we are delivered...but from what? Again, my question from earlier, saved from what?

The idea of heaven or hell, in connection with salvation, is relatively recent. And so this leads me to think that this 'final destination', whether it be the good place or the bad place, isn't part of the question of salvation. Instead, some suggest that we are freed from eternal separation from God. And that's one possibility, but I would suggest something altogether different.

In Eden, when humankind chooses to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and when God discovers this, the curse that is placed upon humankind is that they no longer have eternal life; their misdirected love has consequences. Amongst all the other parts of the curse, there is one inescapable power that they will know: death. Death is one of the many powers and principalities at work in the world. Through Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection, Jesus defeats the power that Sin and Death have in our lives. Jesus defies death and demonstrates that God's love, God's power of love, God's powerful love, is stronger than the clutches of death. And it's through Jesus' resurrection that death is defeated and rendered powerless. And so, what are we saved from? We are delivered from the power that Sin and Death hold over us in our lives. We are freed from being enslaved to Sin and Death. I think this is made particularly poignant in the name for Jesus in the First Nations Translation of the Bible, 'Creator set's free.' Now this isn't the 'grace abounds, Sin boldly' kind of freedom. This isn't the "I'm good with God, I can do whatever I want" kind of freedom. This isn't the I'm saved, business as usual. Rather, this is, as one friend of mine suggested, this kind of salvation is the "I'm saved...now what?" kind of salvation. This leads us to the third movement. What are we saved *to*?

One of the distinctives of the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith is that we take discipleship seriously. We recognize that baptism is a starting point for a life of following Jesus; it's not an endpoint. It's the initial step on the journey, not the culmination of a life lived. As such, we also believe that when we receive God's gift of salvation, we are receiving it to live into something.

Jesus died on the cross out of love for his friends and creation, but not just that, Jesus also shows us the degree to which he and God are willing to go to be in relationship with creation. They are willing to go up to the point of death; to put it another way, they are willing to die for us. Christ shows us God's love on the cross, and in turn, we followers of Jesus are inspired to receive this gracious gift of love and to love God and others in return. It's a love that transforms, a love that is worth dying for. It's a love for one another, for our communities, our neighbours, even our enemies. We are freed, liberated, saved, to love, as Jesus and God love.

Salvation, justification, freedom, deliverance, liberation, all talk about an orientation with God. It talks about our relationship with God. In the beginning, humankind was created as good; we were created in the image of God. And for one reason or another, we choose to turn our backs on God. However, as much as we turn ourselves away from God, God, is always turning to face us, because God wants to be in relationship with us. God's love for God's creation is so deep that God cannot help but turn to love us.

To talk about Salvation as an absolute would be a mistake. Salvation as a notion is far broader than the narrow space that it has been given in the last century or so. We are living in and living into something that Jesus started millennia ago. Through Jesus' actions on the cross, we are freed from what we are freed from the yoke that is placed on us through misdirected love, Sin. And because of this freedom, we are freed to love the way that Jesus and God love. So for me, as I've come to understand it, Salvation is by Jesus, from the powers of Sin and Death, and to love.

Amen

Sending Blessing

And now,

may you,

saved by Jesus,

turn and face God,

may you,

saved from enslavement,

lead others to the freedom you have found

may you,

saved to love

go into the world to love

Go in peace to love and serve God,

Amen