

“The Transformation of the Human Spirit: 3) The Search for Salvation

a sermon by

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Text: “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3: 13-14).

In this week’s New Yorker Magazine there is an article by Margaret Talbot, entitled “Best In Class: Students Are Suing Their Way to the Top.” In this article Talbot points out the intense academic competition that is found in so many high schools, colleges, and universities. A case in point is Sarasota High School in Sarasota, Florida, where several years ago the principal of the school found himself in quite a dilemma. Toward the end of the school year it became apparent that several seniors were deadlocked in the race to be valedictorian of the senior class. The school had a policy in place to break ties. “If the G.P.A.’s were the same, the award was supposed to go to the kid with the most credits.” Apparently, one of the top students had learned of this rule, and he took a couple of extra easy courses to insure that he had the most credits. When this student was awarded the title of valedictorian, some of the other students raised such a

ruckus that it almost disrupted the entire school. Because of the intense competition, many schools have dropped the recognition of valedictorian and some schools have had to deal with lawsuits resulting from this intense competition.

But this spirit of competition and the pressure to succeed does not end in high school. It is alive and well on many college and university campuses where students compete for acceptance in graduate schools and choice employment opportunities. On some college campuses it is not uncommon to find some students who use mood-altering drugs, such as speed and Adderall, in order to stay awake for long periods of time. At times these drugs are supplied by the parents of the students.

I.

Over the past several weeks we have looked again at Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. It is one of the so-called "Prison Epistles" where Paul is writing to the church from prison--in Rome, or Ephesus, or even Caesarea Philippi. In this letter, Paul touches on some of the most critical issues that Christians face: the question of how a person can bring good out of a very difficult situation; the question of how a person finds meaning in his or her life; the struggle to find joy even in the midst of suffering. This morning we deal with the search for salvation.

II.

The search for salvation was a very real one for the Apostle Paul because he was, by every definition, a very high achiever. This was particularly true in his religious life. As he points out to the church in Philippi, Paul had a religious resume second to none. He was a devout Jew. He had been circumcised when he was eight days old, in conformity to Jewish ritual. He was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the premier tribes of Judaism. With regard to the Jewish law he was a Pharisee, which meant that he belonged to an elite religious group that practiced strict adherence to the Mosaic Law. In addition, as a devout Jew he was a zealous persecutor of the Christian movement. He was feared in Christian circles as one of the most devout persecutors of the church. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus in Syria one day when he was struck down by a bright light and encountered the risen Christ.

The witness of the Apostle Paul, however, is one that is as critical today as it was two thousand years ago. Paul found a different kind of "righteousness"--not one based on human achievement, but one based on a righteousness received by him through faith in Jesus Christ. Because of that, he was willing to count everything else as loss--every achievement, every honor, every good deed. For Paul salvation was by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

This past year Martin Marty, who for a number of years has taught at the University of Chicago, published a remarkable biography on the Protestant Reformer of the 16th Century, Martin Luther. Now, there are many different assessments of Martin Luther. He was undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in the history of Western Civilization. He was literally one of the few people who have lived who actually changed human history. Luther's translation of the Bible into the German language unified the German language and people and it is today still the

definitive translation of the Bible in German. His support of human freedom and the right of the individual conscience is a watershed in religious liberty. His writings and sermons literally reshaped the landscape of Europe and there are few, if any, religious thinkers that are his peers.

But Martin Marty is correct in assessing that fundamentally Martin Luther was a person who “wrestled with God, a God-obsessed seeker of certainty and assurance in a time of social trauma and personal anxiety, beginning with his own.” For Luther the great question of human existence was the question: “How can a sinful person stand in the presence of a just God?” Luther tried every means available to him to justify himself in the presence of God. He prayed without ceasing. He joined a monastery. He fasted and confessed his sins unceasingly. But he was always haunted with the question of whether he had, in fact, done enough. Finally, he turned to Scripture. In his studies of Romans, Galatians, and the Psalms he found the answer to the questions that haunted him so greatly. In Romans he read the words of the Apostle Paul, “The just shall live by faith.” Luther discovered what Paul had earlier discovered. Salvation is not a human achievement. It is a gift of God’s grace through a person’s faith in Jesus Christ.

III.

Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, once observed that “there are few words more strange to most of us than ‘sin’ and ‘grace.’” During the centuries they have lost so much of their genuine power that some have wondered whether we should even use them at all. But there is something mysterious about the great words of a religious tradition: they cannot be replaced.

When most of us think of the word “sin,” we think of an immoral act--stealing, killing, committing adultery--or some other violation of the laws of God. But Tillich points out that “sin” should never be used in the plural, because before sin can ever be an act, it is first a condition. Sin is the state of separation in which all of us find ourselves. We are separated from God, from our neighbors, and from ourselves.

Most of us are aware, at least on some level, of the deep separation that exists in the separation of ourselves from those around us. Some of these are very disturbing. This past week our nation was once again confronted with the terrible legacy of slavery as the United States Senate was forced to face the tragedy that over four thousand lynchings occurred in this country and that every attempt to pass legislation to outlaw this failed to pass the Congress of the United States.

But there is something also deeply profound about the separation we find even with those to whom we are most closely bound. Husbands are separated from wives. Brothers and sisters are often deeply separated from each other. Parents and children find themselves often alienated from each other.

It is important, however, to note that we are not only separated from other people. We are also separated from ourselves. Some years ago a distinguished psychologist wrote a book, entitled *Man Against Himself*, in which he made the point that we are often at odds with

ourselves. Life sometimes moves against itself through aggression, hate, and despair. We often talk about self-love. But there is also this mixture of selfishness and self-hate that permanently pursues us, and prevents us from loving others.

Often we find ourselves in conflict, not with other people, but with ourselves. The Apostle Paul understood that. He wrote, "For I do not do the good I desire, but rather the evil that I do not desire." He senses a split between his conscious will and his real will, between himself and something strange within and alien to him. He called that estrangement sin.

Thus the state of our life is an estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the creator of our life.

IV.

In writing to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul observes, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Paul said these words not to be sentimental but because they describe the experience of his own life. In the picture of Jesus Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other people, from himself, and from his God, he found himself accepted in spite of the fact that he was rejected. And when he found that God accepted him, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others.

In that moment in which grace struck him and overwhelmed him, he was reunited with that to which he belonged, and from which he had been estranged. Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the Word of God. Nor does grace imply that we are making progress in our moral life, in our fight against our special faults or in our relation to society. We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by God's grace. It either happens or it does not.

Grace often strikes us when we walk through the valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we are estranged from another person. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year the longed-for perfection does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades. Sometimes at that moment there is a voice that says, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." When that happens, we experience grace; we are transformed. In that moment grace conquers sin, and reconciliation overcomes estrangement. Nothing is demanded of this experience, nothing but acceptance.

In his letter to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul raises the question: "What can separate us from the love of God in Christ?" That is the question I want to raise today. What is

it that is separating you from God's love in Christ? Is it a divorce, an illness, a bad job, disappointment in a child or parent, some addiction over which you have no control?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that none of these things can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen!