

Sermon for October 9, 2016: Now thank we all our God

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I have a sign in my kitchen. It says: “You are entitled to food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention. Anything else that you get is a privilege.” I got it in the gift store at Alcatraz after a particularly long day during which my two children seemed to be complaining incessantly – about their food choices, the amount of walking we had to do and, most frequently, about each other. “Why,” my son wanted to know, “do we have to stop in all the stores *she* likes”? “Mo-om,” moaned my daughter, “tell him he can’t do that!” Cries of injustice rose again and again as each suggested that the other was getting some kind of advantage. I was not, they told me, being *fair*.

They are, of course, not the only ones who decry the unfairness of the world. Although some psychologists think that “fairness” is an advanced human construct, I think that the desire for justice is an extremely basic one. You tell your two year-old that he needs to give up the bigger cookie to his cousin because she’s a guest and I guarantee you will get a loud chorus of, “But that’s not FAIR!” And the desire for fairness is not limited to children. I’m sure that every person in this room has at least one story of being passed over for a promotion that we felt we deserved, or being blamed for something we didn’t do, or seeing something we love end up in the hands of someone we think is unworthy of it. Our desperate longing for fairness shows up regularly in our conversations about schools, sports, public policy, and yes, religion.

But what do we really mean when we say we want things to be fair? For some of us, “fairness” is about making sure that everyone is equal – leveling the playing field. For others, it’s about treating all people the *same*, without regard to their innate human differences. But for many people, especially in this country, fairness is about making sure everyone gets what they deserve. Or, as Sally Brown puts it in “The Charlie Brown Christmas Special,” “All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share.” For better or worse, we live in a political system in which earning what you have is highly valued – where even a billionaire who has lived a life of incomparable privilege feels it necessary to describe himself as a self-made person.

The Apostle Paul was certainly a hard-working Christian. Most of his letters contain at least some references to the hardships he endured in his efforts to spread the gospel. Today’s reading from Timothy – which was probably not written by Paul - places the apostle in chains, having once again been imprisoned for his faith. According to the writer, Paul is able to endure his suffering because he knows it will lead others to salvation through Jesus Christ. He is “approved by God, a worker who has no need to be ashamed” – an example of one who is willing to die for Christ in order to live with him, who, by enduring, will reign with him. It seems like Paul has definitely earned his salvation.

This idea, that the Bible tells us that salvation can be earned, is very dangerous. It can be blamed at least in part for both the sense of entitlement that leads to religious intolerance and the unhealthy glorification of suffering. Throughout history, the

Christian precepts of hard work and sacrifice have been taken to dangerous extremes by those hoping to earn salvation through acts of self-abasement. The notion that suffering is beautiful and holy has also created the myth of the “blessed” poor, whose anguish in this world will be offset by glory in the next – a view that some Christians have used to excuse themselves from helping those in need.

None of this is justified by this passage, which does not suggest that Christians should *seek out* suffering, nor does it tell us to die so we can be *like* Christ. What it says is that suffering and dying are part of being human. What is *important* is how we understand our human condition. What is important is that we have faith - because it is by faith that we know that we will never suffer or die alone. It is by faith that we recognize that all that we are and all that we have are part of something vastly greater than we can achieve on our own - and that the truest, best essence of who we are will live on in that holy communion. *That* is what it means when Jesus tells the lepers that their faith has made them well.

Lepers, in Jesus’s society, were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were not even allowed to come near healthy people. They had to rip their clothing and announce their arrival in any populated location by calling out the word, “Unclean!” Their illness was not just physical, but emotional, social, and spiritual. They were so unwell that they did not even ask Jesus to heal them, only to have mercy on them. This story is not, then, about their prayers being answered. It is not about their faith being rewarded. It is about the simple fact that Jesus had mercy on them, just as Jesus has mercy on us. This story

tells us that faith is not about believing our prayers will be answered. Faith is believing that our prayers *have already been answered*.

The lepers demonstrated only the most basic faith – the belief that Jesus would show them mercy. But that simple understanding was more powerful than all of our sophisticated efforts to earn salvation by saying the right prayers, performing the most beautiful ritual, and offering the right interpretations of scripture. Notice that the story does not distinguish among the lepers. There is no good leper or sinful leper, because it is not what they do that matters – it is *who* they ask. Because salvation is not something we can *earn*. Salvation is a gift - and whenever we decide that we can earn it – that we *have to* earn it – we are rejecting that gift – and denying the power of Christ -the power to make us well – the power to make us *whole*.

That is what God wants from us – simply to accept the gift of salvation that we have already been given – and to accept it with gratitude and joy. That is what made the Samaritan leper different than the others. They were made clean through Jesus’s gift of mercy. *He* was made well – in body, mind and spirit – by demonstrating the joy that comes through true faith – faith expressed not just in gratitude, but in *praise*.

We can do the same. Instead of asking God for what we want, we can thank God for what we have. We can live our entire lives with gratitude - by *practicing* our faith - by freely sharing our lives and our livelihood with one another with no strings attached. We can stop and recognize the Amazing Grace that is *already* part of our communal lives – and we can remind one another that when we ask for God’s mercy we do not –

praise Jesus! – get what we *deserve*; we get much, much more. When we begin to live into the gratitude that comes from knowing what we already have, we stop worrying about what is *fair* – and we no longer need signs that tell us what we are and are not entitled to. Instead we can focus on a much different message - the message that I posted right beside my sign from Alcatraz. *That* sign reads, “But you always have love. Love is neither an entitlement nor a privilege. Love is always free.” AMEN.