

In God's Addition

Acts 2:37-47

Guest preacher: Dr. Thomas Gillespie, President Emeritus - Princeton Theological Seminary

Sunday, July 26, 2009

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles is interested in numbers. Not for their own sake, to be sure, but numbers nonetheless. Luke records in chapter one, for example, that at the beginning of church history the disciples numbered about a hundred and twenty (vs. 13).

In chapter two he tells the story of the church going public with its faith on the Day of Pentecost. Peter proclaimed the gospel for the first time with the result that there were added that day about three thousand souls (vs. 41). It gets even better in chapter four where we are told that many of those who heard the word believed and they numbered almost five thousand (vs. 4).

In chapter six we read that the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem (vs. 7). Now we have gone from simple addition to multiplication. Read on into chapter nine and you will learn that the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in number (vs. 31). In chapter twelve you find these words: But the word of God continued to grow and multiplied (vs. 24). In chapter sixteen Luke reports that the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily (vs. 5). By now you find yourself exclaiming, "Alright, already! I get it!" It is the nature of the church to grow.

But the church does not grow itself. For it is like that "pretty little girl that had a little curl in the middle of her forehead, and when she was good she was very, very good, and when she was bad she was horrid." When the church is on its game there is nothing quite like this community of faith that brings together in one body people from so many different racial, social, economic, political, and educational backgrounds.

But there is also the adage that there is no fight like a church fight. So it is not the church that attracts people into its membership but the God who speaks to human hearts through the gospel of Jesus Christ that the church proclaims.

As Luke explains in our text for this morning, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (2:47)." In other words, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month, year-by-year, century-by-century, the Lord draws to himself through the gospel those who are being saved.

Now that kind of language spooks some Presbyterians. Southern Baptists get saved. We tend to plea bargain. But the verb "saved" is a well-attested part of the vocabulary of the New Testament with synonyms like "redeemed" and "delivered" and "liberated." If you are among those who are put-off by the word, I would like to reclaim it for you this morning. And I begin with a personal story.

Anyone who has ever seen me play golf knows immediately that I have not wiled away my life on the golf course. I may not be the worst golfer in the world, but I am definitely a contender for that title. Princeton Seminary's backdoor neighbor is the Springdale Golf Club. The last time I played that course my vice-president shot 121 and beat me by two strokes. And that was the front nine. But I will confess that as a youngster growing up in Los Angeles I did wile away many an hour in the surf of the Pacific Ocean along the west side beaches from Redondo to Santa Monica. Now body surfing is great fun along that shore, but while you are doing it there are two bad things that can happen to you. One is that you can get caught in a rip-tide that carries you out to sea. The other is the danger of an undertow that takes you down and then out.

So all along that stretch of beach there are life guard stands, each manned by a strong swimmer who keeps a watchful eye on those in the water. When he sees someone in trouble, the guard leaps to the sand with his float in hand and races into the surf. With powerful strokes he reaches the distressed swimmer, wraps

the float around that individual's waist, and swims back to shore with the person in tow. At the end of the day each life guard reports for the record the number of "saves" made while on duty. "Saves" is their non-religious word, but it tells us what the term connotes when used in the New Testament. It has to do with life-- the preservation of life, the restoration of life.

I told this story once at the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, and at the door after the service a big, strapping blond fellow came up to me and said, "You are right, Dr. Gillespie. I am a life guard at Huntington Beach and I held the record last August for eighty saves in one month." In other words, eighty people were still alive that Sunday morning because this young life guard had saved them from the treacheries of the surf.

And the Lord added to their number day-by-day those who were being saved from life-threatening conditions. But there are other contexts in which the word "saved" is meaningful.

One year the presidents of our ten Presbyterian seminaries brought the chairs of our respective boards of trustees with us to our annual gathering. A colleague introduced the brain surgeon who served as his board chair with this story. We have a son, he explained, who suffered from what we thought was severe epilepsy right into his high school years. It was often so bad that despite his bright mind we were afraid he could never go to college. When this doctor joined our board, he learned of our son's condition and asked if he could examine him. The result was a totally different diagnosis, the condition being one that could be corrected surgically. The operation was successfully performed, and as a result our son will graduate next year from Princeton University. Then he pointed to his board chair and said, "That man saved our son's life." What he meant, of course, was that the surgeon had delivered the boy from a debilitating condition and enabled him to enjoy a rich and full existence.

The New Testament uses the term in the same sense. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved by the enhancement and enrichment of their lives.

Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean is Professor of Youth Ministry at Princeton Seminary. She is a Methodist whose heart, like that of John Wesley, has been strangely warmed by Christ and she has a passion for teenage young people. Her ministry is to prepare seminary students for a cross-cultural mission to the teenagers in their future congregations. It is cross-cultural in the sense that our young people today live in a youth culture that is defined by the music they listen to, the magazines they read, the movies they watch, the friends they make, and the technology they use. It is a world with its own values and morals and beliefs. To minister in that context you have to prepare like you would if you were going as a missionary to some tribe in distant Borneo, including learning the language.

So Dr. Dean asks the question, "What would salvation look like to a contemporary American teenager?" One answer she finds in the social consequences of America's fifty percent divorce rate as well as the ever greater number of two-income families. She notes the statistic that the typical American father spends less than one-and-a-half hours per week one-on-one with his children. She points out that this pattern makes it increasingly difficult for many youngsters to have a meaningful relationship with an adult they can rely upon. This is why so many turn to their peers for strong relationships, which is often a recipe for disaster.

Dr. Dean suggests that for these young people salvation might look like a personal relationship with a loving God -- a relationship with a heavenly parent that they can count on 24/7. That, of course, is precisely what the Christian message offers to us all-- a relationship in which we are loved unconditionally by the One who is our Creator and Redeemer.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved from a sense of personal isolation and cosmic loneliness.

But salvation can connote something even more radical. One year the trustees of Princeton Seminary went to the Holy Land together, taking along two professors-- one who taught Old Testament and one whose field was New Testament. Needless to say, it was an educational experience to be remembered. I, myself, will never forget our visit to Jacob's well in Samaria where Dr. Donald Jewell read and interpreted the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at this well as recorded in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of

John. But the entire tour was filled with such teaching moments. On our last day in Jerusalem we visited the Garden Tomb, the Protestant version of the site where Jesus was buried. The Orthodox and the Roman Catholics insist that the real site is within the city walls of Jerusalem where they have built not one, but two churches-- one over the other, to commemorate the sacred place. The faculty authority on such matters at the Seminary assures me that this is more likely the actual tomb of Jesus, but I like the Protestant version better because it is a garden and looks like I think it should.

Anyway, as our group was standing in line awaiting the morning opening a large number of college age young adults came in behind us. From their conversation it was evident that they were fellow Americans. Standing in the back of our line, I fell into conversation with their young leader. "Where are you folks from?" I asked. "Corvallis, Oregon," he replied, "the home of Oregon State University." "What group are you?" I countered. "These are young people from Calvary Chapel," he answered, "and I am their pastor. Do you know Calvary Chapel?" he asked. Now I had just read a book entitled *Reinventing American Protestantism* by Donald Miller, a University of Southern California sociology professor, that featured, among others, the Calvary Chapel movement. The original Calvary Chapel was founded in Costa Mesa, California, in the 1960's by a then young charismatic minister by the name of Chuck Smith. He began by wandering the beaches of Orange County talking about Jesus to members of the drop-out/turn-on generation. That congregation today numbers over twenty thousand and there are literally hundreds of Calvary Chapels now in the U.S. and even overseas.

When I told this young minister from Corvallis that our group represented the board of trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary and that I was the president he was underwhelmed. For in the Calvary Chapel tradition young ministers do not go to seminary. They are trained in the congregation and when deemed ready to begin a new work themselves are sent out with members of the church to plant a church. This young man had moved to Oregon with seventeen members of the home congregation five years before and their congregation now numbered over seven hundred.

When the gates to the Garden Tomb opened we all entered and went our separate ways, but the two of us met again just outside the alleged tomb of Jesus. As we talked, a young blond girl stepped out of the tomb. Her pastor pointed to her and said, "That young woman has been drug-free for six months now." I asked him to tell me her story and he confided that she had involved herself with the wrong crowd in high school, began using drugs, and eventually became addicted. Her parents and others were praying for her and one night, out of desperation, she came to an evening worship service at which, and these are his words, "she gave her life to Christ and he liberated her from her addiction." Now knowing the power of addiction, you can do with that what you will, but I stood there in the Garden Tomb looking at a lovely young Christian woman whose experience of salvation included freedom from drug abuse. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved even from addictive behavior.

Still others experience salvation in the form of a profound affirmation of their lives. This, after all, is what the apostle Paul was getting at by his message of justification by grace through faith. His version of the gospel was that God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5). God does this by the forgiveness of our sins and the affirmation of our lives by his grace, that is, by his unmerited, undeserved, and unearned love. When you believe God loves you, you know that your life is validated. And be clear about this. God does not love you because you are a believer. God loves you because he chooses to love you. Your faith, your believing you are loved, simply gives you access to God's love in Jesus Christ. The hard part for us to understand and accept is the fact that our lives are validated and affirmed by grace and not by our human achievement in whatever form we think that should take. There was a time in Paul's life when he thought validation depended upon his obedience to the Law of Moses. In our time it more likely takes the form of success in business, attainment of power, accumulation of wealth, social prestige, or all of the above.

Early one Saturday morning the phone rang at our home in California. The caller was a young businessman in our congregation who was going through a mid-life crisis, divorcing his wife, and leaving her to raise their two lovely daughters. He said that it was urgent that we talk and invited me to meet him at the local IHOP for breakfast where I had pancakes and he downed Bloody Marys. His story had everything to do with his deep need for self-respect and the affirmation of his life. The son of an Air Force Colonel who was adept at laying the law down and a failure at expressing love, this young man was raised to believe that no matter how well he did in school or in athletics or eventually in business it was never

quite enough. His father was now dead and gone, but the deep need to justify his life in his father's eyes continued to grip his heart. "I need to be a success," he exclaimed.

In my opinion, he already was... at least in business. His salary, his home, his life-style were all in excess of the standard in our well-to-do community. I asked him to put a number on his desired income that would give him the assurance of success if achieved, but he could not do that because he knew that no matter how much he earned it would never be good enough in his deceased father's eyes. We spoke pastorally of the affirming grace of God that makes us of infinite value in the eyes of our Heavenly Father, but he could not believe it and therefore could not experience its liberating power for himself.

But many have believed it across the years, from the time of the apostle Paul to this very day. And the Lord continues to add to that number day by day those who are being saved from the need to justify their own existence by human achievement.

I hope you have picked up on Luke's language of "being saved" in the sense of a process that continues throughout a life-time, in distinction from the word "saved" in the past tense. For we do experience God's salvation in Christ in many ways as we go through life with its ever-changing circumstances and challenges. The church is the place where that happens when it proclaims the gospel.

Dr. Fred Speakman, a Presbyterian preacher par excellence, tells the story of the college history teacher from Iowa who retired and was given a trip to the U.K. by her daughters because of her interest in English history. On the tour she proved to be a bit of a pest with her incessant questions regarding every place and all topics. In their visit to Westminster Abby, for example, the guide led the group from one crypt to another, explaining who was buried here in the floor and who else over there in the wall. "Excuse me, sir," the retired history teacher interrupted. "Excuse me for asking, but has anyone been saved in here lately?"

I really do not mean to be impudent, and I think I already know the answer. But it is a question worth asking: Has anyone been saved in here lately?

1 Miller, Donald E. *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1997.

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