

Saved?

Isaiah 58:9b-14

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

When I was in junior high, one of my best friends was Kristi. We had a lot of common interests, including that we both really liked going to and being involved at church. But where I went to a United Methodist church, Kristi was Baptist. Our churches and theology were very different. I remember one day Kristi told me she was going to celebrate her birthday that weekend with some church friends. But I knew her birthday was several months away. She said to me, “No, not my physical birthday. My spiritual birthday.” When I looked at her like she had three heads, she clarified. “You know, the day I was saved.” Again, blank looks from me.

I grew up going to church every week. I can’t remember ever not believing in Jesus or knowing about God. Faith was just part of the backdrop of my whole childhood. I didn’t have a single day when I accepted Jesus as my savior. For me, faith has been a gradual process of claiming for myself the beliefs I learned as a child. For others, faith is a great, dramatic moment. There is a clear distinction between life before Jesus and life since. And both of these are perfectly acceptable ways to be a faithful follower of God.

But I didn’t understand what Kristi meant by a spiritual birthday, and I really didn’t understand what she meant by being saved. What does it mean to be saved? You’d be surprised how often I get asked this question. It’s not a word we use much in the Methodist tradition. Not

per se, anyway. We don't really go around asking each other, "Are you saved?" or "When were you saved?" Essentially, the question means, "are you a Christian?"

Now of course, it's a little more nuanced than that. And the denominations and people who use that language regularly would be the first to point that out. What a lot of people mean by that question is, "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that will result in your being saved from going to hell?" So "are you saved" means "are you going to heaven?"

But for me, that's a pretty weak and watered down version of what Jesus offered us when he died on the cross. Salvation is so much more than insurance against going to hell. Salvation isn't just about a future destination. Salvation is about right here, right now. Jesus offered us something we can grasp and enjoy and appreciate today. And we read all about it in our Scripture reading this morning.

When you are saved, according to our text:

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

What wonderful imagery we have here. When we don't maintain a relationship with God, our lives are as dry as a parched garden. The dirt is cracked and brittle. Plants turn yellow, then brown, then they shrivel and die. But when we enter into the Christian life, we are like a lush, green garden, with plants whose roots run deep into nourishing soil. We know what it's like to have those dry times in our lives. When things aren't necessarily in crisis mode, but our lives seem empty. Jesus offers us a life of fullness and abundance.

If this is the reward of salvation, who wouldn't want this? I mean sure, heaven is a great gift. But this is something I can use right now, while I'm waiting to get to heaven. So how do I get it? How do I get saved?

Again, those denominations and people who use this word regularly might have a specific set of directions for you to follow. At the very least, they would probably have a special prayer, called the Sinner's Prayer. Lots of people identify the moment they became Christians because they confessed their sins and claimed Jesus as savior – out loud – in a prayer said to God and witnessed by another Christian. If we all had to do that, it would sure make it easier to answer the questions “have you been saved?” and “when were you saved?”

But John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, struggled with this concept. He didn't understand salvation as a single moment or event. Now keep in mind, one of the most famous stories of Methodist history tells about a night John attended a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street. He had an experience that he described by saying, “my heart was strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

So John Wesley could point to a moment when he was saved. But if you ever asked him if he was saved, he would answer, “I was saved, I am being saved, I will be saved.” For him, salvation was an ongoing process. It wasn't a one-time deal. Since we as humans continue to sin, even though we try to be faithful Christians, we continue to need salvation in our lives.

So what do we have to do to get this salvation? Well, technically, we don't have to do anything. That is, we don't have to earn it. Jesus freely and willingly gives it to us. But Jesus doesn't go around saving people against their will. You have to want it. You have to accept this amazing gift that Christ is holding out to you.

When John and his brother Charles first started the Methodist movement, their group started as a sort of prayer meeting once a week. He called this group meeting a ‘society.’ And their rules said there was only one requirement for membership in the society: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.” So how do you prove that you want to be saved? Well, they said that if you really wanted to be saved, it would be obvious with the way you lived your life.

Now John Wesley was a very methodical person. Hence the name Methodist. He liked to make lists and categorize things. So he came up with three rules, called the general rules, to instruct people on how to continue on the road of salvation. And the rules are pretty easy to remember and understand.

Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

Do no harm. That’s pretty easy, isn’t it? Don’t do anything to hurt yourself or others. We have a few examples in our Scripture reading this morning. Isaiah tells us that in order to do no harm, we need to “remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...” Those are still harms we’re tempted with today, right? But there are other things we struggle with too. John Wesley listed several, including taking the name of God in vain, addictions of all sorts, and selfishness (especially with money). But it’s really as simple as doing to other what we would not have them do unto us. As Christians, if we really want to be saved, we have to be trying to do no harm.

Secondly, we have to do good. And that’s also a pretty easy concept. Again, it’s mentioned in our Scriptures and by John Wesley. In Isaiah we read that we should, “offer our food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” Wesley said we should also visit and

help those who are sick or in prison and share the good news of the gospel with anyone we meet. If we want to be saved, we have to do more than avoid certain harmful actions. We have to intentionally be doing helpful things.

But anyone can do no harm and do good, yet not be a Christian. You need all three rules to really show your desire for salvation. And the third is to stay in love with God. Our Scripture gives the example of keeping the Sabbath holy. John Wesley talked about going to church, reading the Bible, and praying privately and as a family.

Now keep in mind, these were the rules for the early Methodists. Nowhere in Scripture does it say we have to keep these three rules in order to be saved. Nowhere in Scripture does it even mention these three rules. But clearly the early Methodists got the idea for these rules from the Bible. Even the 10 Commandments all fall into these three categories: do no harm, do good, stay in love with God.

So are you saved? Would you like to be? The good news is that we can have a salvation that offers us more than the promise of heaven, some hopefully far-off day in the future. We can have a salvation that saves us not only from hell but also from the dry, emptiness that living for yourself can produce. And if that sounds good to you, then it's time to have a conversation with God. Let Jesus know that you want to accept his free gift of grace. Let God know that you intend to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with him. And because we were saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved, I'd recommend having that conversation more than once. Every time you have that chat with God, you continue to build your relationship. And then "you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." Amen and amen.