

Easter 4A 2023

In Luke's book of Acts, we read that, in the early days of Christianity, before they had been forced out of Judaism, the followers of the way were sharing resources with one another, were eating together, were experiencing joy in community.

Luke sums up his description of their communal life by saying that many were "being saved."

We understand that he means they were being saved through these activities together, through building a community based on love where imperfect people work together in humility.

Luke, who knew Jesus personally, focuses on how people are living out the teaching of Jesus, each one using his or her gifts for the whole.

Historically, the farther away in time we got from those who knew Jesus, the more people have tended to focus on the nature of Jesus rather than on his teaching.

We see this already in John, who wrote later than Luke, *after* the followers of the way had been kicked out of the synagogues by their fellow Jews.

John tells us that whoever enters *by Jesus* will be saved.

The focus is shifting already from what Jesus taught to the nature of Jesus.

This trend continues as Christianity develops.

People eventually create entire theologies about Jesus, called Christologies.

Today, some branches of Christianity seem to put more emphasis on what people believe *about* Jesus than on how to live out his teaching.

They focus more on cosmic magic than on love, and would say derisively to someone like me, “You’re saying that Jesus was just a teacher!” even though I do not dispute that he was an incarnation of the Christ.

Some have reached a point that they believe that we need to be saved by Jesus *from* God, from God’s wrath, rather than saved *for* God, for a relationship with the creator.

Though it is a little complicated, I want to explain this a bit further for those who find it interesting before moving on, so bear with me.

Despite finding in John an inchoate form of this focal shift from Jesus’ teaching to the nature of Jesus, Luke and John’s descriptions of salvation do not differ.

John simply wraps his view of salvation within the importance of Jesus.

It is a subtle shift that does not alter the fundamental message, though it can be viewed as a step towards the development of a Christology.

People now say that Luke has a low Christology and John has a high Christology, but I doubt anyone would have said that Luke had a “Christology” at all had John’s “higher” Christology never been written.

Anyway, the main points are that *how* Jesus taught us to be is more important than the nature of Jesus, and that John and Luke's messages about the nature of salvation are similar.

Specifically, John writes that Jesus came that we might have life, and life abundantly.

So, at this early stage, salvation does not yet mean the avoidance of hell in the afterlife by believing the right things about the nature of Jesus.

For both Luke and John, salvation means abundant life right now, like what Luke was describing—a joyful sharing of community.

When the church gathers together, as we do for Eucharist or in our foyer groups or at our church dinners or for church cleanup days, we have an opportunity to experience abundant life.

We are able to share our different gifts with one another in ways that support the whole.

It is a joy to be valued for the sharing of our gifts, to be a part of something that is caring and meaningful.

We are being saved not from God's anger, in other words, but from *our* anger, hatred, negativity, loneliness, emptiness.

A healthy community brings about the transformation of its members.

By healthy, I mean one that is not based on fear and exclusion but love, hope, and humble inclusion.

Inclusion means seeing the good in people no matter where they are from.

It means people across the political spectrum.

It means inviting in *everyone* who is interested in living together in a community of love, hope, and humility.

Some will arrive more spiritually advanced than others, but each person is provided the opportunity to develop at his or her own pace.

There are many people in the world who wish to be guided by love and hope who have not yet found their way to the church.

We seek to invite them in, because we understand that salvation is a process that comes about not in a closet with a Bible, but in communion with others.

There are also people in the world who, at least at this point, have no interest in being guided by love and hope.

They are self-interested.

They rarely enter a church.

They are, in Jesus' metaphor, thieves and bandits, and one can sense it.

One can sense that they are not interested in the well being of those around them, but only in what they can get from them.

They are not interested in learning trust, humility, compassion.

They are not being saved.

When we turn our lives towards hope and joy, when we turn towards God, we are experiencing abundant life.

We are then able to share that life with others, to lift others up and to be lifted up in the process.

If we isolate, on the other hand, then we become anxious, lonely, depressed, angry.

Sadly, isolation is exactly what our culture has been good at producing.

We have built cities that necessitate our spending more time inside cars than walking and meeting others.

Success means having our own private theater, our own private pool, our own private bowling alley, etc.

We lionize people who were (at least in the way we tell the story) radical individuals.

We do not acknowledge, in other words, how their ideas were built upon the ideas of others.

We refuse to admit that we always enter into something already in progress.

We join in that process as we learn from our teachers, from books, from experiences
with others what has already been done.

Only God creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

None of our creativity exists in a vacuum, but our society behaves as if it does.

The result is a documented epidemic of loneliness, of depression, of anxiety.

In contrast, our Eucharist emphasizes that we are one.

It is a moment of supreme togetherness that gives us practice and strength for what goes
on after the communion and outside of this building as we seek to gather together
all those who desire a community of love and humility.

In the Eucharist, we sense our wondrous connection with others so that we can go out
into the mission field and live out of that knowledge, of that joy.

So what is our role out there?

What is our responsibility when we go out into the field?

I often hear people say that we are to leave the world a better place.

I do not think this is quite right.

There is a difference between making the world a better place and helping others to be
better in it.

If we intend to make the world a better place, then we fall into the trap of knowing how that should be, the trap of utopianism.

We lose all humility.

Others are simply in our way.

If only they would see the light, then we could have the right society and everything would be wonderful, except God has created the world so that it is always shifting, always challenging, always imperfect.

If we seek to help others to be better off in it, on the other hand, then we focus not on ideas (the perfect world), but on people, on their needs, which are remarkably like our needs.

We fight less over ideas and work together to support one another.

We seek to bring people into a healing community within a world that is never perfect.

In doing so, we grow together.

We are being saved together.

Our Christology is less important than our willingness to lift others up.

Salvation is joy in community.

We are saved from our anger, hatred, negativity, loneliness, emptiness for a relationship with God.

This happens when flawed people work together for the common good.