

June 25th, 2023

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Dayton

Walking in the Newness of Life

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I remember the first time someone asked me if I was “saved”. As a lifelong Presbyterian I had grown up knowing that I was baptized and being taught to sing Jesus loves me with the confidence of someone who really knew it was true. I remember confirmation where we were encouraged to ask deeper questions about faith and allowed to write our personal faith statements for the first time. But “being saved” was not the language that I was ever really taught to use to refer to my faith. And so the first time someone looking straight at me and asked, “Are you saved?” I suddenly felt a wave of doubt and insecurity about my salvation that my Presbyterian upbringing had not prepared me for.

And maybe you have felt that way too if you have ever found yourselves in a more evangelical church setting. The first time I was faced with that question was in my first few weeks of college- what I now affectionately refer to as my “ecumenical era.” Suddenly for the first time in my life, due to the nature of collegiate campus ministries in Texas, I was suddenly plunged into a world filled Baptists and other evangelicals who had a faith language that felt completely foreign to me. I knew that the answer they wanted to hear was yes...and so that’s what I said. But I did later wonder if that particularly meaningful worship service at the closing of church camp really counted as “being saved” or not. Because in my mind I had always “been saved” just not in a way that was not so much about one single, dramatic moment.

It wouldn’t be until seminary that I would really have the language to describe the incongruity between how I had always talked about my faith and how my new Baptist friends talked about it. What they were really talking about when they referred to being saved is the idea of “Justification”. Justification is that turning point moment- it is that moment that we go from being chained by the brokenness of this world, to being freed to a new life that is made possible in Christ. For me as a Presbyterian, justification was something I just didn’t think about a lot. If I had I might have thought it had happened at my baptism, or even that it really happened, as Paul says in the first chapter of Romans, once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Justification to me was more about something that God had already taken care of, rather than something I needed to do.

What I had spent most of my Presbyterian life thinking of as salvation was not justification but sanctification. Sanctification is about how we live now that we have received that grace, how do we live into the freedom that Jesus has given us. How do we become compassionate, caring, generous people who work to bring about a more just and loving world. To me that is what it meant to be saved.

Of course, both that turning point moment and the lifelong process of sanctification are part of the bible’s holistic view of salvation. So this morning I want to begin by reading you part of the

first chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. And I want to invite you to listen to how he describes salvation:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Break for Anthem

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the greatest theological treatises of all time, as well as one of the most difficult to understand. But it is certainly one of the earliest examples we have of the theology of the early church. Paul's letter to Rome is very different from his other, shorter, and more practical letters to the churches in Galatia, Corinth, and Philippi and there is a reason for that. The letter to Rome has an entirely different feel because Paul has never been to Rome. These are not churches he was personally responsible for planting or nurturing. These are founding churches planted by other early church leaders and Paul is writing this letter as an introduction. So rather than offering advice and encouragement, Paul spends the first 15 chapters of Romans laying out his theological credentials, hoping to impress the Romans with his teachings. To close his letters Paul often writes specific hellos to church leaders or personal friends, but the greetings at the end of Romans are by far the lengthiest. Paul spends a whole chapter creating a sort of first century Linked-In profile. He is trying to gain credibility with the Roman churches by showing that he knows many of the same trusted and respected church leaders that they know!

So although chapter 16 is often skipped because of our dislike of long lists of names we are unsure how to pronounce, it is really a treasure trove of information about the early church! And we can discern a few different things about the people Paul names, the first is that they are clearly early evangelists and church planters just like Paul. Many seem to be people who have started house churches, who would probably have regularly preached and led sacraments in their home for the budding Christian community. And interestingly we know that many of them are women's names. Some of them are clearly couples, husbands and wives leading a church together, and sometimes Paul lists the women's name first, perhaps indicating some sense that she is considered the primary spiritual head of the household like Lydia, who Paul himself puts in charge of a newly planted church in the book of Acts. But many of them are women whose names are listed by themselves, making it clear that Paul has no qualms about working with female pastors, preachers and evangelists and citing their authority to bolster his own.

From a biblical and historical perspective this is not surprising at all! We know that women were considered important leaders in the early church. The women who are with Jesus throughout his ministry are deeply trusted people like Mary, her sister Martha, and Mary Magdalene. These women are the last faithful with him at the cross, the first to witness the resurrection, and the first charged to preach the good news. In Romans 16 we see that Paul, who is writing several decades after the resurrection, continues to see female church leaders as worthy of his personal greetings and respected enough by the larger community for it to be essential to his credibility to mention them. Listen now for Paul's closing greetings to the church in Rome:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon^[a] of the church at Cenchreae, ² so that you may welcome her in the Lord, as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the gentiles. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert^[b] in Asia for Christ. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia,^[c] my fellow Israelites who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was... ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Some of you may come from more conservative or evangelical backgrounds where that language of being saved is very common and where the major emphasis is on "saving souls." You may have had very emotionally powerful spiritual experiences in those places that still shape your faith today, and I want to make sure you know that I value that and believe that those experiences are real, important, and something that perhaps we Presbyterians ought to talk about a little more! I know that I learned a lot by spending my four years of college surrounded by a much more evangelical church culture than the one I had been raised in.

But, I also came to have some very strong critiques of these more justification focused traditions. Because there is such a thing as too much focus on talking about salvation in those terms. First and foremost, that language of being saved often leads to extremely individualistic ways of thinking about salvation. It becomes entirely about personal repentance and personal sin. And of course we all make mistakes, fall short, and even commit some big capital S sins. So it is important to lift-up the practice of confession and receiving forgiveness for our actions. Yet, the over focus on individual sin and salvation begins to ignore the forces of sin and evil in the wider-world that both Jesus and Paul seem to want us to be focused on. If we are only thinking of saving our own souls for a world to come, we may completely forget the ways Jesus calls us to live out our faith by working against the big systems of injustice and brokenness like poverty, hatred, violence, hunger, and sickness right here on earth.

Paul asks the Romans---if we have been saved, should we just go on allowing sin to flourish, ignoring the life of discipleship that Jesus taught us? By no means...it's a rhetorical question and

Paul means for it to be a rhetorical question! But what he is pointing out is something I have seen plague our more evangelical brethren—an over focus on personal salvation and purity that neglects the calling to serve our neighbors and proclaim God’s kingdom in the face of the powers of the world that still actively harm God’s people.

So, I was dismayed to see a prime example of this in the news coming out of the Southern Baptist Convention last week. For those of you who have not been following this news, the Southern Baptists spent a large portion of their annual conference voting to expel two churches from their fellowship for the sin of ordaining women. One was the large megachurch in California, Saddleback Church, where Rick Warren, noted author of the bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is the founder and lead pastor. They also expelled another a small community church in Kentucky. And then the SBC doubled down on their position by passing additional wording in their constitution to make it abundantly clear that women are completely forbidden from the ministry of pastor. It is always sad to see a church split, and for many it was shocking to see a church in 2023 continue to double down on such an outdated policy.

Sadly, I was definitely not shocked. I sometimes hesitate when asked to talk about my call to ministry to get too deep into the details. And that is because my sense of call really came to life during those ecumenical years that I spent mostly surrounded by Baptists. The reason I don’t like to talk about it too much is because that tiny fragile seedling of my call grew up in the midst of a faith community tainted by deeply misogynist rules and practices that had the effect of choking off the calling of many women. Certainly some individuals among that community were quietly supportive, but the overall structure was aligned very much against women in leadership in both large and small ways. Yes, I was asked to lead a bible study...but it was made quite clear that the rules would strictly limit any leadership to teaching only women or children, but never men. To these people, God was quite literally a man, and therefore manliness was equated with Godliness and any deviation of gender or sexuality was seen as weak, less than, and sinful. I remember a particularly painful occasion when I suggested to the leader of the men’s small group that we might occasionally combine the groups and suggested we meet to talk about it. This was a person I had gone on mission trips with, been in prayer groups with, and knew well as both a friend and fellow Christian. And the ugliness and fear with which he rejected even talking to me about sharing in the leadership of our two bible studies forever broke our friendship.

My sojourn into the evangelical world was short but gave me great concern and empathy for women who had lived their lives fully immersed in that culture. I had only ventured there with the protective armor of my loving and affirming Presbyterian upbringing- and I was grateful for that. In the years that followed, I re-immersed myself in the world of Presbyterians and other mainline church folk who affirmed my leadership and allowed my sense of call to grow and flourish and heal from the pain of those experiences. Surprisingly, my Baptist friends challenged me to know my bible more deeply, and the end result of the deep study of scripture over my years of seminary and beyond, was that I became even more convinced that the biblical witness strongly supports equal opportunities for all people to hold leadership roles in the church.

I have healed from that time, but in reflecting on those experiences I have also unfortunately come to see how the oppression of women’s leadership is often the tip of the iceberg that creates

a cover for far deeper sins of violence and abuse. And that is heartbreakingly true for our Southern Baptist sisters and brothers in this moment. For all of the raised eyebrows at this most recent crusade against women's leadership in the church, this is nothing new. But what it has achieved is that it has shifted all of the attention away from the real story of sin. Because now no one is talking about the recent revelations that the Southern Baptist Convention has a list of over 700 male leaders who they know have used their positions of power within the church to commit sexual abuse against an untold number of victims. This reality was exposed about a year ago and almost nothing has been done to prosecute these men, expel them from the church, or to protect future victims.

So this year at their annual conference, when they should have been completely focused on their abuse problem, they instead chose to scapegoat the supposed sin of a few wayward female preachers and their churches. And by creating this diversion they have avoided reckoning with the very real ways that their choice to devalue the full humanity of women also allows the perpetration of violence and abuse on a huge scale to continue. As much as the silver-tongued spokes persons will assure us that women are essential leaders in their churches, many of us who have been a part of these communities know the truth. Women are valued leaders as long as they stay in their lane. As long as they don't rock the boat or challenge the men, they are allowed to participate. Women like popular author and teacher Beth Moore are welcomed and even celebrated, until they try to talk about the problem of abuse in the church. Even men as powerful as former President Jimmy Carter and megachurch pastor Rick Warren are viewed as expendable if they are going to spill the dark secrets about how the church's devaluing of women contributes to a culture of secrecy and blame that protects the abusers at the expense of the women and children who have been victimized.

It is no coincidence that the two Christian denominations most known for their theological structures refusing women's full equality in the church are also the denominations wrestling, or failing to wrestle, with the disgusting sinfulness of sexual abuse festering in their midst.

Let's remember Paul's words...What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!

By no means can we sit quietly, patting ourselves on the back for our more enlightened thinking on gender equality, when there are churches who, in the name of Jesus Christ, are allowing women and children to continue to be abused. By no means, can we continue to see this as a "them" problem.

It is so tempting to shake our heads, but then go back to minding our own business. I wish I could say there has been a flood of op-eds from Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, and Lutherans decrying this position of misogyny and drawing attention back to the real victims. But that has yet to materialize. We stay quiet. Perhaps it is because we do not like to fight, or perhaps it is because we are too busy having fights of our own, like the Methodists right now, who are tearing one another apart over denying our LGBTQ siblings their full sense of call- simply another form of the same sin.

The truth is that by allowing the Southern Baptist Convention and others like them to maintain such a chokehold on the megaphone of popular Christianity, our churches are being dragged down with them, painted with the same brush in the minds of the public.

I can only imagine the number of parents across the country who will read the news and vowed once again never to subject their daughters or sons to organized religion. Because, my friends, younger generations do not flee the church because of the lack of rock bands or TV screens, they flee because they are afraid that they or their children will be victimized by the sinful and dehumanizing culture of misogyny, homophobia, and abuse that they have seen so many times in the news or personally experienced themselves.

Our quiet and polite insistence on just keeping our heads down and staying out of the fray allows abusers to continue hurting people and corrupt churches to destroy the integrity of the gospel. If we truly believe that what it means to be saved is more than just a momentary prayer, but that salvation is a life freed from the bonds of sin and working so that all people may also be free to flourish in God's kingdom- then we must act to proclaim that good news. The false and sinful hierarchies of secular culture that give some individuals more power, authority, and inherent worth because of their gender, sexuality, or color of their skin can no longer be allowed to hold sway, when so many of us know that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers a better way.

Paul himself says it best, "In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

So let us stand together and proclaim a truer and better gospel witness for the world to hear. Let us speak up to our friends, our neighbors, and in our communities to let people know that there are Christians who care deeply about protecting the innocent and upholding the inherent value of every child of God. And let's start right now, let's stand together and sing our prayer for the healing of the church and the strengthening of a genuinely life-giving gospel so that all may be truly saved. Amen.