

The Structure of Faith, Part 4

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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John 3:12-18

One night a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to see Jesus. He knew, Nicodemus did, that God was working through Jesus, but he didn't know what to make of it. Jesus tried to explain, without much success. In his gospel, John follows up that explanation with his own comments.

[Jesus was saying to Nicodemus:] “If I tell you about earthly things and you don't have faith, how will you have faith if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who puts faith in him will have eternal life.”

You see, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who puts faith in him will not perish but will have eternal life. Because God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but through him to save the world. The one who puts faith in him is not condemned, but the one who does not put faith in him has been condemned already, because he has not put faith in the name of God's only Son.

Galatians 12:19b-20

Here and there in his letters, the Apostle Paul manages to crystalize the heart of faith in a few words. In Galatians 2, we find a stellar example.

I have been crucified with Christ. I myself am not living any more, but Christ is living in me. What I am living now in the flesh, I am living by faith in God's Son, the one who loved me and gave himself up for my sake.

Children's Story

Last week I told you about a giant tree falling onto the beaver dam up on Cripple Creek. About a flood threatening the entire Great Forest. About all the animals not managing to do anything about the giant tree. And about the giant tree being moved somehow and the Great Forest being saved.

But I didn't tell you about Sammy the Squirrel.

Sammy had been doing a funny thing for a squirrel. He was rooting around in mole tunnels not far from Cripple Creek, not far from the beaver dam with the giant tree on top of it.

While Sammy was rooting around underground, the water started to rise. It entered the mole tunnels where they were closest to Cripple Creek. It started to flood those tunnels farther and farther along. Minute by minute the water came closer and closer to Sammy the Squirrel. He was in great danger. But he didn't know it. And he kept on exploring the mole tunnels.

Then he made two left turns and a right turn, and he ran into water. He turned back around, but he ran into water that way, too. He turned right and found water again. He went back and turned left. More water. There was nowhere for him to go. He was stuck. He was going to die.

He cried out for help. He cried out for someone to save him. But nobody heard him. He was too far underground. So he closed his eyes and lay down in the tunnel to wait for the end.

But the next thing he knew, he was above ground again. He was wet, but he was alive. And he was in the sunlight.

He didn't know what had happened to him. And he didn't know how it had happened. It was like he was dead and then he was alive. It was like he had been born all over again. Amazing!

Sermon

I've had at least one large goal for this series of sermons. I have wanted to give attention to two aspects of faith and its structure. There's the cosmic aspect, where we have a whole creation in misery, in exile, alienated from God and from itself; where we have a whole creation loved by God and the object of a great rescue; and where we have a whole creation turning toward God in gratitude and awe. That's the cosmic aspect.

I've also wanted to give attention to the personal aspect, where we have individuals in misery, in exile, alienated from God, from one another, and from themselves; where we have individuals loved and saved by God (that's today's focus); and where we have individuals living transformed lives out of gratitude to God. This individual aspect is important, especially for us because, while it's overemphasized in some places, I'm afraid I may not emphasize it enough. Today, then, the focus is on the individual. On you and you and you and me and God knows how many others. All of us the objects of God's love. All of us rescued from exile.

And each one of us needs to be rescued. Rescued from brokenness all around us. The four year old earthquake orphan in Haiti needs to be rescued. The "man in the gray flannel suit," whose career is slowly killing him, what with all the pressures of a struggling economy and threatened downsizing and the corporate expectation to work longer and harder and to do more with less — he needs to be rescued.

Each one of us needs to be rescued. Rescued from brokenness at home. The middle school brother and sister whose parents are angrily divorcing need to be rescued. The nineteen year old college freshman who cuts herself in the middle of the night, hoping to feel something, needs to be rescued. The worn out mother of four whose only comfort is a well-stocked liquor cabinet needs to be rescued.

Each one of us needs to be rescued. Rescued in the deepest places. The high school senior, mom's golden boy, praised by everyone, never failing to reach his goals, who tends to look down his nose at boys made of sand instead of gold like him — he needs to be rescued from himself. And the foundation director who oversees generous gifts to the worthiest of causes, whose heart breaks at the plight of single mothers and their children (today's widows and orphans), yet who never once has a thought about God — she needs to be rescued from the deepest emptiness, though she may never feel it.

Each one of us needs to be rescued. Rescued from the messes we ourselves have made. A husband who has torn down his wife instead of building her up, reducing her to an empty shell, needs to be rescued from the twist in his own heart that makes him mean. And she, of course, needs to be rescued, too. A pastor who has ignored the cries of his flock and not tended their wounds needs to be rescued from his own blindness and hardheartedness.

Each one of us needs to be rescued.

Our rescue begins with God's love and faithfulness. John, in his gospel, puts it this way: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who puts faith in him will not perish but will have eternal life" (3:16). Let me start at the beginning of the verse. Eternal life rather than perishing. That's rescue.

When we hear eternal life, we think right away of living forever, maybe of living forever with Jesus. But it's not so much a question of how long we live, but of what kind of life we live. The expression "eternal life" refers to the way life will be in the kingdom of God when it comes. A life not of brokenness but of blessing. A life not of alienation but of wholeness. A life lived not in exile but at home, where we truly belong.

Life in this world, life apart from God, is a life that kills us, a life by which we perish. But God gives a new and different kind of life. It is life with Jesus. He is the life, so that only makes sense. If life apart from God, which is the fundamental human exile, our alienation from God — if life apart from God is the problem, then life with Jesus is the solution.

God gives this life through Jesus as an act of love and faithfulness. That's the beginning of the verse: "God loved the world so much." Loved it enough to hold on to it and never let go. Loved it enough to make promises and to keep them. Loved it enough to call Abraham and Israel, so that every family on earth would be blessed.

The world over, people argue about God: who God is, what God is like, what God wants, and of course whether God even is at all. The Bible never argues about God. The Bible assumes God. In the Bible God is a

given. What the Bible does is to tell stories about God. And the heart of those stories, and of the big story — if we'll let ourselves get beyond the rough edges and if we'll show some grace to an ancient, alien (to us) culture — the heart of the story in the Bible is God's love and faithfulness. This is best seen in the story of Jesus Christ.

That's the middle of the verse. Out of love and, with that, out of faithfulness to promises, "God gave his only Son." It's by faith in this Son of God that you and you and you and I are rescued from exile, are brought home, and truly begin to live.

Begin to live because God, in his love and faithfulness, takes us through death to life. In a lot of ways, we're already dying: all the miseries and indignities that afflict us, the messes we find ourselves in, the messes we get ourselves into. But we have more dying to do before we can begin to live.

Faith is not believing in Jesus or believing certain things about Jesus. Faith is joining Jesus in his death and through that joining him in life, new life. Listen to how Paul puts it: "I have been crucified with Christ. I myself am not living any more, but Christ is living in me" (Gal. 2:19b-20a). Another word for this is repentance.

Repentance is much more than being sorry for a particular sin. Repentance is turning away from an old way of life — a way of life which is really a way of death, a way of life far removed from and far short of what life is meant to be — repentance is turning away from that old way of life and turning toward a new way, a new way of life with Jesus Christ at the center. Jesus at the center. Jesus, not me. Jesus, not my family. Jesus, not my job. Jesus, not my friends. Jesus, not my reputation. Jesus, not my lust. Jesus, not by intellect. Jesus, not my appetite. Jesus at the center!

Faith, as I've said these several weeks, recognizes the messes we're in. My faith recognizes the mess I'm in. And it says, "No! This is not the life God intends. This is not the life God gives. God has in mind more than this and more than I could ever make from this!" And my faith turns to Jesus, because everything life is meant to be I see in him. And when I make room for Jesus, for his life to become my life, then I'm really living. Even if I die.

And this new life — "Christ living in me" is how Paul puts it — this new life is the work of the Spirit. It's not something you do. It's not something I do. The Spirit does it. And we cooperate with the Spirit. And it's a process. We're not all the way dead, not yet. We're dying. And we're not fully alive, not yet. We're coming to life. We still live in the old world, while we're waiting for the new one. The old way of life lingers, while we struggle to express the new one.

But again, we have have the Spirit. If we have faith, if there are glimmers of dying and rising in us, then we have the Spirit. The Spirit is the origin and energy of new life, unstoppable new life, in us. We still live "in the flesh," as Paul puts it. In other words, our transformation is still in process. But in the flesh, in that process, we've begun to live a new life, the life of God's kingdom, the life of love and faithfulness — which is God, which is Christ — the life of justice and fair-dealing, the life of reconciliation and peace, the life of kindness, gentleness, self-control, and so on, the fruit of God's Spirit in us. With the Spirit, we tend and cultivate that fruit. And by that fruit, we know we're coming to life!

Let me wrap this up with an analogy. Imagine that Haiti was your home. Imagine that you were going to move from Haiti to Denmark. In Denmark, Haitian French won't get you very far. You would have to learn Danish, wouldn't you? Eventually you would need to be able to say *Rødgrød med Fløde* like a native.

Now, before you move to Denmark — and you are going to move! — before you move to Denmark, while you're still living in Haiti, it would make sense, wouldn't it, to start learning Danish? And to start speaking it, speaking it as often as you can, so that you would get accustomed to the language as much as you can while you're still living in Haiti?

To put faith in Jesus is to start living the new life of the coming kingdom of God while we're still living in the "old country." We start living that new life now, living it by the Spirit, because we know the kingdom is coming, and because we want to be ready.

Each one of us can start to live that new life, to speak our new language — you can and you can and you can and I can and God knows how many others can — because out of love and faithfulness, God gave his Son to rescue us from exile, each one of us, and to bring us home.